



Romanticism's Impacts on 19th Century Artists

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ABSTRACT

Since political press exploited ordinary civilians, artists who were ordinary civilians criticized politics in their artworks. In 19th century, artists created Romanticism as a way to explore freedom and nature.

This article explains the meaning of Romanticism through three artists and their artworks.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, 19th century artists, freedom, nature, pyramidal structure, politics

When looking at a painting, do you ever wonder why the artists painted the way they did? In creation of incredible artworks, the artists typically followed a specific trend of artistic style. One such style, known as Romanticism, prevailed in France during the 19th century and impacted artists in their depiction of strokes, colorations, and compositions. With the influence of Romanticism, many French artists became Romantic artists. This study will be focusing on the relationship between Romantic artists' paintings and Romanticism, focusing primarily, on the artworks of Theodore Gericault, Eugène Delacroix, and Edouard Manet.

Romanticism initially appeared at the start of the 19th century. For artists at that time, Romanticism appeared to express imagination and emotion.¹ Romanticism deals with nature where unpredictable possibilities occur and presents a unique perspective of the world in which artists can advocate for their ideas and beliefs.² Using Romanticism as an aesthetic and psychological term for criticizing, artists in France and Britain began developing their criticism.

Theodore Gericault's *Raft of Medusa*, completed in 1819, is a quintessential example of Romanticism style. Gericault depicted a national scandal on an sixteen by twenty-three feet canvas, as his final submission to the Paris Salon, the

1 Galitz, Kathryn Calley, "Romanticism," The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roma/hd_roma.htm#:~:text=Romanticism%2C%20first%20defined%20as%20an,and%20flourished%20until%20mid-century. (accessed August 28, 2022).

2 Hareshwar Roy, "Classicism and Romanticism," English Literature, <https://www.englitmail.com/2017/06/classicism-and-romanticism.html#:~:text=Classicism%20was%20based%20on%20the,approaches%20towards%20reason%20and%20imagination>. (accessed August 28, 2022).

official exhibition of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.³ Reports of the incident made Gericault's artwork immediately recognizable. The story began in 1816 when *Medusa*— a French naval ship that carried two groups of people: French government officials and abolitionists— was on its way to Senegal, a colony of France.⁴ While the government officials sought to maintain France's possession of the colony and ensure the commerce of slave trade, the other group hoped to ban slavery in Senegal and cooperate with Senegalese and French officials to develop an agricultural system that would make Senegal self-sufficient.⁵ However, the captain mistakenly sailed the *Medusa* around the coast of West Africa and crashed the ship.⁶ The government officials got into the lifeboats, leaving the remaining hundred-and-fifty passengers to die. The remaining passengers created a raft using the masts of the *Medusa*, but only ten people of 150 people aboard the ship survived.

Gericault's interest was piqued upon reading the survivors' stories of cannibalism, murder, and other terrors aboard the raft in print media.⁷ At first, Gericault interviewed the survivors from the raft of the *Medusa*. Next, Gericault examined the sketch of the raft, designed by Alexandre

3 Claire Black McCoy, "Theodore Gericault, Raft of the Medusa," Smarthistory, <https://smarthistory.org/theodore-gericault-raft-of-the-medusa/> (accessed July 13, 2022).

4 Ibid.

5 "The Raft of the Medusa Theodore Gericault - A Romanticism Analysis," Artincontext, <https://artincontext.org/the-raft-of-the-medusa-theodore-gericault/> (accessed July 14, 2022).

6 Ibid

7 "Raft of The Medusa," Gale Primary Sources, link.gale.com/apps/doc/R3209726166/GDCS?u=balt85423&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=7472900e (accessed July 31, 2022).



Correard when he was left on the coast of West Africa.⁸ Finally, Gericault began drawing the human compositions of living and dead.⁹

Gericault's sketches demonstrate the influence of Romanticism. One of the preparatory drawings of *Raft of Medusa*, the unfinished work of a naked man conveys a sense of ambiguity because Gericault deliberately left many places blank. The artist used a typical Romantic method, employing both warm and cool colors, to capture how a body looks under its light source. To indicate a light source from the upper right, Gericault used black, blues, greens, and grays along the man's left elbow, left side of his neck, and lower back. In addition, to depict different groups of muscles and to convey their modeling the artist used different levels of color saturation in different parts of the body. Interestingly, the contrast of the color defining groups of highly developed muscles indicate man around age thirty. The specific details Gericault drew in this preparatory drawing aligns with the realistic nature of Romanticism.

Other features of the sketch establish it as a romantic work. The unusual composition of the man, who turns his back while extending his right arm and propping his left hand on his waist, makes viewers wonder what he is doing in the picture. Additionally, the unfinished touches leave room for the imagination of the viewers regarding the man's job and status. Due to his nakedness from the waist up, the man might be in the lower classes because a man working shirtless typically does not appear in elite society. At the same, the artistic tradition of the nude figure goes back to antiquity and has often signaled an idealized status, rather than historical realism. Thus, the man's nakedness produces a tension between the realism necessary for a history painting intended to document a lived experience and the classical tradition in art. Among the partly sketched, an unfinished detail is the glove the man wears on his left hand. Though unfinished, this detail suggests that the man might have worked as a laborer or builder, perhaps in connection with architecture. All of these details that Gericault worked into a single preparatory drawing gave a sense of Romantic style and paved the road for *Raft of the Medusa*.

Gericault created *Raft of the Medusa* in Romanticism style not only to break with the conventional art style and conservative tradition of history paintings in the nineteenth century, but also to reveal the corruption within the French government. Gericault's politics and the historical event of the Medusa's accident shaped the preparatory drawings for his painting *Raft of the Medusa*. As an example, Gericault used cool and dark colors to communicate the desperate situation on board the raft in the sketch *Despair and Cannibalism on the Raft* (1818).¹⁰ In the sketch, at least one man is eating the arm of

8 "The Raft of the Medusa Theodore Gericault – A Romanticism Analysis," Artincontext, <https://artincontext.org/the-raft-of-the-medusa-theodore-gericault/> (accessed July 14, 2022).

9 Claire Black McCoy, "Theodore Gericault, Raft of the Medusa," Smarthistory, <https://smarthistory.org/theodore-gericault-raft-of-the-medusa/> (accessed July 13, 2022).

10 Ibid.

a corpse which indicates that this group of people have been on the raft and stuck in the middle of the ocean for a long time. Furthermore, a man at the center tries to suffocate a woman. Although the background is blurred, viewers can still see that a group of survivors is fighting ferociously. Depicting such a tremendously pathetic, irrational, and violent scene, Gericault caused viewers to ask what caused cannibalism, murder, and fighting aboard the raft. Diving under the surface of these horrors, Gericault aspired to condemn and expose the government officials who exploited the weakest and poorest on board in order to fulfill their own ambition. In depicting this violence Gericault made visible the extreme conditions in which elite passengers on the Medusa had left the others, revealing the political and humanitarian ramifications of their abandonment. As a result, *Raft of the Medusa* reveals a vicious human nature regarding corruption through the desperation of the survivors.

The overall structure and composition of *Raft of the Medusa* is interesting and quite revelatory. In the painting, survivors aboard the raft form two pyramids that drew the viewers to their peak. The pyramids form between the standing man and people reaching him, and a flagpole and the people on the verge of dying. In the first pyramid, the hands of other figures guide the viewers' eye to the man waving a cloth. This symbolizes a sense of hope in which the man undertakes the only hope by waving to the endless ocean and wishes that some crew ships could rescue people on the *Raft of the Medusa*. Simultaneously, the sagging, defeated figure on the left side of the painting indicate that they have been lost in the middle of an ocean for a long time. Thus, the action of the man waving may be the last, desperate act of hope before they are consumed by interminable dread.

For those viewers who themselves held little political power beyond their collective existence, Gericault offered not the critique of violence, which was directed as those in power, but instead the artistic tools associated with Romanticism to convey the suffering aboard as well as the possibility of peace and salvation. Since Romanticism advocates for people to delve into their self-identity and personal expressions toward the natural world, Gericault showed Romanticism through depicting the crowds aboard the raft of the Medusa.¹¹ In *Raft of the Medusa*, Gericault paints with somber colors and dramatic dyes, using muddy colors on the clothes of the survivors and for some of the clouds. With a light source trained on the survivors, he guides the viewer to observe all that they have suffered. In addition, Gericault's light also directs the viewer to two men standing at the rightmost edge of the raft waving clothing in search of help. In the far distance, the masts of a ship are barely visible over the waves. The action of waving down a ship across the seascape corresponds with Romantic ideals, according to which humans use their creativity and find their values in nature. The raft on the ocean and the ingenuity required to survive in nature, implies that through adversity, humans may discover meaning in the natural world. Thus, Gericault

11 "Romanticism," Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/romanticism> (accessed July 30, 2022).

painted contemporary historical events with the artistic tools of romanticism.

In 1830, Romanticist Eugène Delacroix, painted *Liberty Leading the People* as a memory to celebrate the July Revolution.¹² In *Liberty Leading the People*, Delacroix found a way to spread freedom of the crowds by depicting the mutineers in July Revolution with vivid colors and special compositions symbolizing anger and a desire of freedom.

In *Liberty Leading the People*, Delacroix underscored the historical significance of the July Revolution which happened in 1830 from July 27 to July 29. On July 26, 1830, French King Charles X published restrictive laws against the principle of the Chart of 1814¹³; This Charter required the monarchy to guarantee the liberty of citizens, but Charles X ruled France in an absolute style in which the appeals of the crowds got ignored.¹⁴ As a result of deprivation of French civilians' rights, the July Revolution broke out on the street of Paris in an attempt to overthrow Charles X.¹⁵

Liberty Leading the People not only realistically depicts the July Revolution, but it also uses techniques from Romanticism to describe the perspective of the protestors. Through Delacroix's use of lustrous colors and his interpretation of Romanticism, *Liberty Leading the People* immediately attracts viewers' focus on its symbolic allegory—freedom. Looking at the painting broadly, the viewers might notice a half-naked woman standing at the central point of the painting, looking at the people behind her, and holding the national flag of France. Observed more closely, the viewers could tell that the woman's beautiful anatomical structures, such as her sharp nose, typical double eyelids, plump chin, and the rich color of her breasts correspond with classical depictions of Greek goddesses. Moreover, the woman's clothing, especially her red cap, represents the "liberty cap" that prevailed within the working classes to express their indignity brought by suppression from the Monarch in July Revolution.¹⁶ Concurrently, the woman holds France's national flag in her right hand, and a bayonet in her left hand. Diving through the surface, the flag and the bayonet represent a modern society where dangers occur in political and physical forms. In this way, Delacroix juxtaposes modernity and antiquity to form a contrast between freedom and restriction.

12 "Liberty Leading the People." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_Leading_the_People#/media/File:Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix_-_Le_28_Juillet._La_Libert%C3%A9_guidant_le_peuple.jpg (accessed September 1, 2022).

13 "July Revolution," Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/July-Revolution> (accessed September 3, 2022).

14 "Charles X and July Revolution," OER Services, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory2/chapter/charles-x-and-the-july-revolution/> (accessed September 3, 2022).

15 Ibid.

16 Alicia Zelazko, "Liberty Leading the People," Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Liberty-Leading-the-People> (accessed September 3, 2022).

Similar to *Raft of the Medusa*, *Liberty Leading the People* also has a pyramidal composition. The flag hoisted by the central female figure creates the peak, while the crowds around her for the two lateral points. Like the man waving in *Raft of the Medusa*, the woman watched by the crowds in *Liberty Leading the People* leads and undertakes the hardship of rebellion; however, unlike to the man who is the only hope of the survivors, the woman is one of the many hopes of the protestors. In addition, the pyramidal composition highlights the gravity of the rebellion through the corpses on the ground, the fogs in the background, and the long queue of protestors. These elements suggest that victory of the crowds who fight with the Monarchy requires sacrifice, pain, and persistence. Although the chaotic structure of the corpses, fog, and crowds creates a sense of chaos, the overall structure of the painting create a sensation of order that overpowers the chaos.

Observing the male rebels in *Liberty Leading the People*, viewers might find that they are of different statuses based on their looks. A variety of characters and classes emerge: a rough man who has glabellar lines on his forehead wearing a dirty shirt, a glamorous man who wears a clean jacket, top hat, and vest, and a naïve looking lad holds a pistol in both of his hands and standing in front of the protestors. In all cases, Delacroix uses rich and powerful colorations of Romanticism, such as the transition from the bright blue to yellowish green, then to yellow, and then to red, to demonstrate the deep desire for freedom of the protestors. From the various characteristics of the protestors, Delacroix claims that people with different hierarchical classes gather to form a rebelling community that fights for the bright future of the crowds. Using romantic elements, such as the woman's yellow dress tied with red rope, the woman's lustrous face, and the man's top hat, Delacroix suggest that the rebels yearn for idealistic freedom without political interventions. As a result, Romanticism plays an important role in emphasizing the purpose, recognized as freedom, in *Liberty Leading the People* by forming direct contrasts between the woman and the corpses, and the usage of colors.

Another French artist who embraced Romanticism as a means of capturing current events was Edouard Manet. Although Manet did not use as much dramatic contrast in his choice of colors as Gericault, Manet also criticized crucial deficiencies within French sovereignty. While Gericault criticized French politics in general in 1819, Manet focused on condemning Napoleon III. Similar to Gericault, Manet produced a number of preparatory drawings for his paintings, and these were marked by the historical era in which he worked.

In 1868, Manet produce a series of preparatory drawings to support the production of his history painting, *The Execution of Maximilian*.¹⁷ Like Gericault's preparatory drawings, these

17 "File: Manet. Esquisse de L'exécution de Maximilien.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manet._Esquisse_de_L%27ex%C3%A9cution_de_Maximilien.jpg (accessed July 13, 2022).

were also designed to support his depiction of a real event. In one sketch, one can see that a firing squad is in the process of executing three men. Since the man at the center has the clearest outline, viewers can guess that he is the main character, Maximilian I. Manet deliberately chose this point of view, where the executioners are facing the three men and having unclear outlines. This choice suggests that Manet wanted to show the inner state of mind of the three men about to get executed and to render anonymous executioners extensions of the guns that they wield. His focus is on the experience of the men who will die. Although the outline of the clouds of smoke from the gunshots indicates that the three men have already been shot, their clasped hands show a lack of fear and an acceptance of their fates.

In 1864, Maximilian officially became the king of Mexico. Nevertheless, conservative Mexicans and the French emperor Napoleon III came up with this scheme to enable Maximilian's monarchy. The goal of conservative Maximilian was to overthrow Benito Juarez, who advocated liberal reforms in Mexico in the early 1850s; Meanwhile, Napoleon desired to expand his imperialistic control over Mexico through manipulating Maximilian.¹⁸ However, Maximilian's benevolence towards his people debilitated his control over Mexico when competing with Juarez, and Maximilian had to use his inherited earnings for daily expenses.¹⁹ Although French armies strengthened Maximilian's powers by repelling Juarez in 1865, the United States forced the French armies to withdraw in 1867.²⁰ Therefore, Juarez retrieved his power and forced Maximilian to abdicate; nevertheless, Maximilian did not go into exile and betray his beloved citizens; instead, he chose to be executed on June 19, 1867.²¹

As soon as Manet noticed the news of the execution of Maximilian he felt empathy for Maximilian and blamed Napoleon III for his political ambition and betrayal that led to Maximilian's death. While preparing for the *Execution of Maximilian*, Manet was inspired by *The Third of May*, drawn by Francisco Goya.²² From a similar starting point as Goya, Manet tried to use his paintings to convey the horrors and distortions of wars, much as Gericault had conveyed the horror of abandonment at sea.²³ Moreover, Manet sought to prioritize morality and ethics over nationalism.²⁴ By 1869, Manet finished *The Execution of Maximilian* and tried to

18 "Maximilian," Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilian-archduke-of-Austria-and-emperor-of-Mexico> (accessed July 22, 2022).

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 "In the line of fire: Manet's The Execution of Maximilian," The National Gallery, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/learn-about-art/paintings-in-depth/in-the-line-of-fire-manets-the-execution-of-maximilian?viewPage=2> (accessed August 1, 2022).

22 "Art & Politics." Red Line, https://www.redlineartworks.org/section652294_309325.html (accessed July 22, 2022).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

exhibit it in the Salon; however, French critics argued that Manet depicted the death of Maximilian as unsentimental and cruel. Furthermore, Napoleon III felt embarrassed by the painting, so he censored Manet. Therefore, Manet had to exhibit *The Execution of Maximilian* outside of France.

In addition to the obstacle of encountering censorship from French critics and Napoleon III, Manet suffered from syphilis, and this prospect of death intensified his pursuit of fame, driving him to seek an audience in the United States. At first exhibition in New York, *The Execution of Maximilian* stirred up controversy.²⁵ Critics from *Boston Journal* described *The Execution of Maximilian* as "unrelieved by any sympathy or sentiment."²⁶ Instead of using warm colors to convey the heroism of Maximilian's sacrifice, Manet had opted instead for a cold palette depicting the stark, terrible reality of his death. Moreover, critics from *New York Herald* wrote,

"Historically considered the whole scene is incorrect; for the three men were over two paces apart and were shot standing on a hillside with their executioners below them and inside a hollow square of 4,000 men. Mejia, besides, who is represented as of about the same height as his companions, was a very short man. Maximilian had also changed his place from the center to the left of the line. The costumes and accouterments of the soldiers, too, might be criticized on the score of inaccuracy."²⁷

The harsh critiques explain how insufficient Manet thought before he published *The Execution of Maximilian*, but the straightforward compositions of executors, criminals, and overall layout form a direct effect visually in which viewers could immediately understand the historical event in the painting. Although some critics blamed Manet for his sketchy and ugly works presented in *The Execution of Maximilian*, other critics appraised Manet for his creativity of unorthodox way to present his thoughts on reality.²⁸

Through *The Execution of Maximilian*, Manet criticized the unstable political problems within Mexico and the use of

25 Mishoe Brennecke, "Double Debut: Edouard Manet and The Execution of Maximilian in New York and Boston, 1879-80," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn04/296--double-debut-edouard-manet-and-the-execution-of-maximilian-in-new-york-and-boston-1879-80> (accessed July 22, 2022).

26 "Boston Post (Boston, Massachusetts) 31 Jan 1880, Sat," *NewsPapers*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=4881893&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlXzZpZXctaWQoIjcxNzk0MT-c1LCJpYXQiOiJlMjNk0MTM0MjgsImV4cCI6MTY1OTQ5OT-gyOH0.GQb5772Dgn_0vEXByqlqSqUHbTUXwicHFzMfTn2Siqk (accessed August 1, 2022).

27 "The New York Herald (New York [N.Y.]), November 20, 1879," *New York Daily Herald*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030313/1879-11-20/ed-1/> (accessed August 13, 2022).

28 "Manet and Zola," *Art Interchange* 3 (10 December 1879), p. 100 (accessed August 1, 2022).

violence to enforce political changes.²⁹ Nevertheless, the American public did not appreciate and appealed to the critical aspect from *The Execution of Maximilian*; however, they sought to discover facts within a painting with accurate and exquisite details, which did not show upon *The Execution of Maximilian*. Although Manet's work did not receive appreciation from the public and some critics, it gained support from a majority of critics and American artists who became obsessed with *The Execution of Maximilian*. Despite its general unpopularity, Manet's work depicted this event in an unapologetically harsh way in order to demonstrate an influence on Mexico's future and the political instability within Mexico.

In *Raft of the Medusa*, *Liberty Leading the People*, and *The Execution of Maximilian*, Theodore Gericault, Eugène Delacroix, and Edouard Manet find their way of depicting their paintings: all the artists sought to remind the viewers of the brutality of political conflict. In these works, Romanticism plays a major role in depicting tangibles contrasts to convey the problems within the stories and the thematic meanings of each painting. Exploring through the paintings, the viewers may not know all the historical facts of the event portrayed, but the evocative nature of the pieces will likely still create a strong emotional response. This emotional resonance, characteristic of Romanticism, allows these artists to use their work as a toll for communicating with posterity not only about the events themselves but also the universal stories they convey.

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29 Mishoe Brennecke, "Double Debut: Edouard Manet and The Execution of Maximilian in New York and Boston, 1879-80," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn04/296--double-debut-edouard-manet-and-the-execution-of-maximilian-in-new-york-and-boston-1879-80> (accessed July 22, 2022).

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Citation: Jin Wang, "Romanticism's Impacts on 19th Century Artists", American Research Journal of History and Culture, Vol 9, no. 1, 2023, pp. 19-24.

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