

Betty Gilson
<http://www.artistrue.com>
ARH 1000
02/12/2001
An Age of Reason, An Age of
Passion

The period following the Renaissance focused the human attention toward the beauty of nature. It was man's turn to be part of the nature and not the other way around. The term picturesque—or “compared to a picture” as Michael Woods defines it in the video program—defines new characteristics of the art from this period.

This period, “An Age of Reason, An Age of Passion,” had a dual nature—rational, responsive to reason, but also anti-rational, responsive to emotion.

“Making one's way through the intellectual history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one must be aware of the shifting meaning of such words as rationalism, naturalism, classicism, romanticism. Like dancers in a reel, they combine and recombine, changing meaning as they change partners” (Stewart et. al, 156).

The Age of Reason—also called the Enlightenment—represents, indeed, an amazing period for new discoveries. Isaac Newton, René Descartes, John Locke, Francis Bacon are only a few of the important names of the period. One of the most important creations of the eighteenth century was

Denis Diderot's "Encyclopédie" in 35 volumes, which covered the entire knowledge as known at the time.

In France, after Louis XIV's death, the extreme austerity at Versailles ended, and a new taste for naturalism emerged "as if released from the constraints of absolutism in form" (Stewart et. al, 156). We are witnessing the birth of the **Rococo** style. The name Rococo is probably a combination of the words barocco, rocaille, and coquille, referring to the rocks and shells motifs—frequently used in the art of the period.

The Rococo style is characterized by a more relaxed style, where the straits lines and right-angles—characteristics for Lois XIV's austere period at Versailles—were replaced by the gentle curving of Rococo forms. In this relaxed atmosphere, private salon entertainment in elegant town houses became fashionable. Taste became a "value above morality" (Stewart et. al., 156). Rococo main themes focused on leisure, love, and fashion. These themes and the "dramatic verve of Rubens gave way to the lyrical tone of Rubens' great followers, Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), François Boucher (1703-1770), and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1804), the outstanding masters of three generations of Rococo painting in France" (Stewart et al., 156).

When it comes to Fragonard and his paintings, I have to mention that he is one of my favorite painters. Paintings like "The Swing" (1766), "A Young Girl Reading" (1776), "The Study" (1769), "The Lover Crowned" (1771-73), "The Meeting" (1771-73) and so many more hold a special magic for me. Every time I look at his paintings, it is like looking at a magic world. It is more like a dream world, or like an old-fashioned story that never loses its charm for a child's ears. Because of

Fragonard's talent, I can also "listen" to his magic stories: a stolen kiss, a flirtation giggle, the sound of the wind browsing through a lovely garden with a magic swing.

From this period, although not a Rococo artist, we have to mention Jean-Baptiste Chardin (1699-1779). "While his contemporaries painted their high-style works of the 'upstairs' aristocratic life, Chardin painted the 'downstairs' " (Stewart et. al., 160): kitchen or pantry copper pots, earthenware jugs, and raw food. His genius can be sensed in the way his paintings appeal to the viewer's visual and extra-sensorial perception.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the rediscovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii (40 years later) raised interest in the classical learning. The "gracefully fanciful forms of Rococo begin to disappear from furniture and interior architecture in favor of classical linearity as well as classical motifs" (Stewart et. al., 162).

In England and France, the baroque architectural style was replaced by Palladian, Gothic and Neo-Classical style. In the painting style, we notice a competition between naturalism and classicism, solved during the second half of the eighteenth century by a mixture of the two styles that it can be called naturalistic Classicism termed as **Neo-Classicism**.

"Neo-Classical style in painting has two principal sources. It is the invention of a brilliant German classicist, Johann Winckelmann, and of academic theory as it had developed by the eighteenth century" (Stewart et. al, 163).

Concepts in the **academy theory** pertained to:

- The **aesthetic credo**: to delight and to instruct;
- **The concept pertained to the ideal beauty**: it was useless to copy nature exactly—one had to select;
- **The character**: ideal physical types had to express ideal character types—for example Hercules;
- **Expression**: a formula for every emotion;
- **Decorum**: all elements in a painting had to be proper in accordance with the circumstances depicted.

Jacques-Louis David is the greatest painter of Neo-Classicism, who will anticipate, witness, and depict the French Revolution.

If classical art was concerned with generalities and universals, the Romantic art was individualist, subjective to individual experiences. The feeling, not the rules, governs the art. The well-established standards are abandoned to the needs of individual expression and human emotions. “While David and his generation reach such ancient classics as Plutarch and Homer, Géricault and his contemporaries were reading books written in their own time by authors such as Byron and Sir Walter Scott” (Stewart et. al., 168). A strong taste of exotic can be seen in the European art.

Napoleon was one of the dominant figures of the nineteenth century, “whose ideals of government were as distant from those that fueled the Revolution as those that separate an empire from a republic” (Stewart et. al., 168).

Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, Théodore Géricault (most famous for *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819), and especially Francisco de Goya y Lucientes are some of the representative names of the **Romanticism**. “No clearer demonstration of the difference between the Classical mind and the Romantic mood can be adduced than through a comparison of Jacques-Louis David, in his purest classicizing period, the 1780s, and his exact contemporary, Goya, in work of the same years, *St. Francis Borgia Exorcizing a Dying Impenitent* (1788). In the former, death is heroic and public; in the latter it is grotesque and private” (Stewart et.al., 173).

After Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815, and the Bourbons returned to the throne, a period of political struggles would follow in France. Honoré Daumier’s dealt with the contemporary political scene.

Subjective objectivity, and the perception of phenomenal reality—expressed so as to externalize the private emotion of the artist—would characterize the following period, the **Romantic Realism**. Poets like Wordsworth, and painters like John Constable (1776-1837) are representative names for this period.

Revivalist Architecture was characterized by one’s desire to project an image pertaining to a certain period (Classical, Middle Ages, and so on).

What a great experience it was to have the opportunity to study the “**Age of Reason and Passion**”! With its main styles—Rococo, Neo-Classical, Romanticism, Romantic Realism, and Revivalist Architecture—we witnessed the birth of the modern world.

Works Cited

Stewart, Andrew, et al. *Art of the Western World: Study Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1989