The Romantic Art of John Constable and Eugene Delacroix

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I have a kingdom of my own, fertile and populous – my landscape and my children.
– John Constable

To claim that an artist was part of the Romantic Movement is a laborious and confusing task. As Isaiah Berlin stated in his 1965 lecture, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Romanticism is that which is undefinable. However, Hugh Honour claims one characteristic by which Romantic artists can be defined, saying “the only constant and common factor in their ever-shifting attitudes and scales of value was belief in the importance of individuality – of the individual self and its capacity for experience.” His statement proves true for John Constable and Eugene Delacroix, for whom individualism is at the heart of their most Romantic works. Individualism influenced their choices in regards to their unconventional representations of the everyday world and the common person, which was considered traditionally to be without artistic merit. Furthermore, it prompted them to use painting styles and methods that aroused the senses and reflected their own personal engagements with the world, rather than ones that appealed to the intellect or represented grand, social, and historical narratives.

For one, Constable and Delacroix depicted subject matter that was beyond the conventions of their time. Constable was part of a larger artistic trend at the time where “public history was overridden by the private history and individual’s relation to the landscape.” Throughout his lifetime, Constable painted pri-
arily within the pure landscape genre, at a time when it was considered to be a lower genre than historical painting.\textsuperscript{4} In its pure form, it was regarded as inferior for its lack of “human action of social and moral significance.”\textsuperscript{5} Generally, a landscape painting was more highly regarded if it contained human figures that alluded to a religious, historical or mythical story. Claude Lorrain, who was the most “revered at that time above all other landscape painters”\textsuperscript{6} respected this tradition. In his \textit{Landscape with Hagar and the Angel} (1646), the landscape acts as the setting for two figures who allude to the biblical story of Hagar; Constable was influenced by this work\textsuperscript{7} and the tradition that produced it, however, he chose to paint landscapes without overt moral content. Moreover, he personally saw the pure landscape genre as high art and strove to have it respected as such.\textsuperscript{8} He reasoned that traditional narratives could be replaced simply by the emotional responses that natural landscapes evoked in relation to past personal experiences.

As Honour explains, the Romantics “felt free […] to give personal significance to those which had long been familiar […].”\textsuperscript{9} Constable’s paintings that depict his native landscapes are “explicitly autobiographical [in] character.”\textsuperscript{10} Constable never travelled outside of England and the only subject matter for his early work is the countryside around his birth place of East Bergholt, a small farming village situated in the valley of the River Stour, Suffolk.\textsuperscript{11} One such work, \textit{Golding Constable’s Kitchen Garden} (1815), was painted from his parent’s home. It shows a view from above, looking down to the back gardens. While it clearly represents a landscape that is very familiar to the artist, the painting’s emotional character also reflects Constable’s family life. Vaughan explains how the quality of afternoon light conveys the passage of time and of the approaching dusk.\textsuperscript{12} It parallels his mother’s recent death and his father’s ailing condition.\textsuperscript{13} It is obvious here that Constable would not have felt it necessary to place a Venus or an Aphrodite in his kitchen gardens, because the relationship this landscape has to his personal history has replaced the classical narrative. He chose subjects that reflected his personal view of the world.

Delacroix differs from Constable in his subject matter, because Delacroix painted within the historical tradition, producing grand narratives. Despite this, his works are unconventional by focusing on the common person rather than the hero. In his \textit{Scenes from the Massacre at Scios} (1824), he paints some of the surviving civilians after the Greek massacre by Turkish forces in 1822. They are wounded, and in some cases, plead for help. They are common people who
wear simple clothes; they are un-heroic and dejected. For critics accustomed to neoclassical depictions of battle scenes, these figures would have been considered as ‘ordinary’ as Constable’s landscapes. Honour explains that in Romantic art, “the grand style and the heroic scale, hitherto reserved for grand and heroic themes – stories from the Bible, the exploits of Greek and Roman heroes, the deeds of rules and their generals – were for the first time adopted to record the sufferings of ordinary people.”

Delacroix also went against convention by using “modern and contemporary sources rather than the classics.” His sources were primarily literary, namely from Shakespeare, Goethe, Byron, and Walter Scott and legends of the Middle Ages. His Death of Sardanapalus does not represent a contemporary event such as Massacre at Scios. However, it does represent a contemporary interpretation of the hero. The story of Sardanapalus has a history of being depicted in art, all the way from Greek sculpture in Antiquity to the eighteenth century. However, a different and new “attitude toward Sardanapalus seems to have been initiated in the nineteenth century by Byron’s play of 1821 (...).” Byron’s described Sardanapalus as a “bourgeois dandy” – one who stands apart from the rest and follows their own moral and social order. It is Byron’s version that Delacroix translates in his painting. This is epitomized by the “the haughty and chill isolation” of the hero who remains apart from the massacre on his elevated divan. Therefore, while Sardanapalus is a traditional figure, Delacroix paints a version of him that is based on a contemporary literary view.

As previously discussed, Constable and Delacroix used unconventional representations of the everyday, as seen in Constable’s landscapes and Delacroix’s contemporary subjects. They made art out of that which was considered to be without artistic merit. They were able to do so because of their belief that the individual artist discovers the artistic value within their subjects. In consequence, they transferred their personal visions into their paintings. These individualistic representations created paintings that do not represent a uniform and ideal reality, but rather one that is fragmented. As Honour states, “in the complex pictorial composition there is no strongly defined pattern around a central axis, nothing to suggest a firm social or cosmic structure – rather the reverse.”

Constable’s portrayals of mundane things “emphasize the ‘framing of the landscape’” and are shown in his use of composition. His paintings bring the view-
er into closer physical proximity to the subject, essentially allowing the viewer to enter the landscape. In his compositions, the viewer stands at eye level or just below the subject. Heffernan explains that “verticality and pre-empted foregrounds” were used “to absorb the spectator, to dissolve the opposition between the viewer and the viewed.” In Constable’s *The Leaping Horse* (1825), one looks slightly up towards the main point of focus, the man on his leaping horse. The tall trees in the background and the expansive sky stand over the figures, and over the viewer. One is immersed in the landscape; there is a directness that one cannot ignore. Constable still used elevated points of view on certain occasions. However, these can be explained by the physical location from which he painted. The painter looks down upon the gardens in *Golding Constable’s Kitchen Garden* because he was painting from a window overlooking the scene.

The physical proximity creates a fragmented view of the landscape where one cannot claim an objective view of the world. Traditionally, landscape painters were physically removed from the subject they painted. This reflects the academic tradition of combining idealized studies of the natural elements in the studio. The artist maintained a more ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ view because they did not experience first-hand the things they were representing. This is shown in the point of views of academic landscapes where the viewer looks down at the landscape from a distance. Constable opposed this tradition in his compositions and in his artistic practices. Producing oil sketches outdoors from the sites he painted was a “central activity” throughout his career. He therefore physically experienced the landscapes he painted. His paintings act like photographs in the sense that they represent Constable as having actually been there and, like a photograph, he presents a “snapshot” of the landscape. He therefore transferred to canvas his own subjective experience and one singular point of view. One does not see the landscape in its entirety but sees one viewpoint.

Delacroix also painted in a fragmented manner and did not pretend to offer an overall depiction of the historical events he painted. In *Scenes from the Massacre at Scios*, he painted a defining historical moment of the massacre. He does not even depict the massacre itself. Instead, he paints the moment after the massacre. The figures are mostly immobile, lying on the ground and upon each other. The only movement comes from the Turk on horseback behind the innocents, and the small group of figures in the background. Friedlander shows how the title word “scenes” points to how the work is “somewhat anecdotal in effect.” He does not present an overall view of what has happened, but in-
As has been shown, Constable and Delacroix were guided by their own “artistic will,”

rather than traditional and academic formulas that were inspired by individualistic ways of seeing the world. Furthermore, they both began to paint sensually rather than intellectually. As Romantics, they wanted “to appeal to the senses rather than to the mind.”

The senses are stimulated by the paintings’ engaging compositions and expressive use of colour and light.

The compositions that Constable and Delacroix used to engage the viewer with the subject on a visual level also engaged the viewer emotionally. Delacroix filled the canvas with his figures in *Scenes from a Massacre at Scios*; they “are pushed forward towards the beholder.” The *Massacre at Scios* marked, for the painter, a move away from the Academy’s veneration of the “frieze-like quality” that was so admired in Poussin and emulated by other painters. Instead, Delacroix framed his figures in such a way that, along with the canvas’ large size, they overwhelm the viewer. One cannot help but feel for their condition.

Constable also used light to provoke emotional responses within the viewer. In many of Constable’s works, he managed to create captivating performances out of what already existed in the landscapes. One such example is *Haleigh Castle* (1828–29). The painting depicts a landscape in which castle ruins sit upon an outcropping overlooking distant seas. The scenery is remarkable for the emotive qualities it conveys. Grey rain clouds darken the left side of the canvas while bright shafts of sunlight light up the dark seas below. A man and his dog stand below the ruins, dwarfed by the landscape. One is unsure whether the storm is moving in upon the diminutive figure and his dog or whether it is just departing. The work was painted soon after Constable’s wife’s death in 1828, and it is often viewed as a sign for his sorrow over this loss. Despite its personal significance for the artist, a narrative is created in the painting through the clouds’ theatrics, which contrast between light and darkness. After all, Constable famously wrote: “it will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the key note, the standard of scale, and the chief organ of sentiment.”

Like Constable’s use of light, Delacroix employed an expressive use of colour.
Chu states that both Delacroix and Baudelaire “stressed that color in painting can summon emotions in the viewer [...] that can be as powerful as those elicited by music.” She later states that “the association of color with emotion was a crucial aspect of Delacroix’s thinking about painting.” In *Death of Sardanapalus*, the heroic figure lies upon a divan covered in a red cloth. The cloth of the divan cascades down over the side and across the floor to where the massacre is taking place. It could almost be a path of blood. It runs diagonally across the canvas, providing a dramatic backdrop to the pearly white skin of the writhing nude females. The black-skinned figure slashing the horse’s neck on the left hand side of the canvas parallels the billowing dark smoke of the right. Along with the rhythmic lines, the painting evokes strong emotional responses.

Delacroix also used colour to convey his individualism. For him, contour represented “idea and convention.” By accentuating his use of colour, and developing new colour theories, he saw himself as rebelling against stylistic formula – asserting his own personal views. Delacroix developed and used innovative colour theories that inspired many later artists, namely the Neo-Impressionists who, through the words of Paul Signac, declared him as their precursor. He did not adopt the traditional practice of mixing variable amounts of black and white to the subject’s colours in order to create half-tones and shading. These were to be painted instead with the complementary colour of the part of the object that was lit. He used colour to convey tonal variations because he saw colour as light; colour could not be separated from light.

In conclusion, Constable and Delacroix employed many innovative artistic practices. Both artists’ paintings, with their expressive pictorial elements, created sensual worlds that inspired the emotions. Both managed to create art out of the everyday, from that which was previously considered to be without artistic merit. In so doing, they defined a personal view and engagement with the world as the basis for artistic creation. This practice represents inherent individualism. A negative aspect to their work is that by representing individual responses and views of the world, rather than a clear and understandable intellectual one, increased allusiveness is bred. These Romantic tendencies have not abated since their time, and contemporary art usually presents fragmented representations of our physical and social worlds. After all, “the social conditions of commerce, industry, and public life that influenced Romanticism have intensified, not disappeared.” At the same time, art is still viewed by many as a powerful method of communication. But the question remains, if art is proficient at
expressing an individual’s interior world, can it still connect to a social reality, and take a political stance in regards to the social factors that influence an individual’s emotional state and well being?

Endnotes

5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 104.
19. Ibid., 51-52.
20. Ibid., 59-60.
21. Ibid., 62.
25. Ibid., 132.
36. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 90.
41. Ibid., 91.
43. Chu, “‘A Science and an Art at Once’: Delacroix’s Pictorial Theory and Practice,” 92.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
Bibliography


Taylor, Joshua C. “John Constable: Letters and Notes on Painting (1802-