Reviews

Conducted by Jane Knowles

American Romanticism and European Painting[1]

THE EXHIBITION CALLED "THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT" IN LONDON THIS PAST summer furnished a unique opportunity to see the arts of the period from 1780 to 1850. This, the fifth in a series of annual exhibitions sponsored by the Council of Europe, was, in words from the preface to the catalogue, "designed to show that in spite of national and religious differences the great artistic movements in Europe have been interdependent and have helped to form a single culture." America's relationship to that culture becomes clearer after viewing the exhibition.

There were nineteen groupings of oil paintings, sculpture, medals, theater designs and even illuminated toys at the Tate Gallery and in the rooms of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which organized the show, there were water colors, drawings, prints, books, book bindings and manuscripts. A thousand objects had been gathered to illustrate the ramifications of this cultural period. While eleven American institutions did lend one work each and the work of at least one artist born in America, the Harrow portrait of Byron by William Edward West, was used, this was the art of Europe. English and French in plenitude, with more German than may ever have been seen outside of that country before and representations from the Romantic art of Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Italy, Switzerland and Spain were juxtaposed to illustrate such themes as the Pastoral, the Italianate Landscape, and Death and the Supernatural. Some critics found the exhibition unwieldy and one which emphasized subject matter to the neglect of problems of style. Very likely the choice made between the two possible goals was the more feasible. Having just come from five months of seeing nineteenth-century European art in fifteen Western European countries I thought the exhibition was representative and I was impressed with the ingenuity with which it showed objects selected by various national committees.

An exhibition like this should dispel any idea that may still be held

[1] Tate Gallery and the Arts Council Gallery, London. *The Romantic Movement. Fifth Exhibition to Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Council of Europe. 10 July to 27 September 1959* (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1959).

that American painters of the early nineteenth century painted with eyes which were uniquely American. They were Romantics first of all with much of European art in their vision. Panoramic Hudson River scenes, buffalo on the prairies, elections at county crossroads were American in the content but painting mountains, exotic animals and homely people was no more American than it was French, German or Swedish. Even the density of pictorial detail is not peculiarly American. John Piper in *The Observer* on July 12, 1959, concluded after seeing the show, "The true romantic is passionate about a fact, not a fiction." His imagination is a passionate one which wrests a significant statement out of particularities.

The essays prefatory to the many pages of valuable documentation in the exhibition catalogue acknowledged the scholarly contentions over what is Romanticism, but timidity does not organize mammoth international exhibitions or write introductory essays for the lay viewer. The unifying idea was presented as the Romantic impulse. Perhaps Sir Kenneth Clark best stated this concept of the Romantic artist in his essay: "It was their great achievement to endow us with a far richer and more complex response to life and art by extending the dimension of time, by accepting the continuance of change, and by encouraging us to explore the recesses of our hearts."

The catalogue is a desirable acquisition even for those who could not see the exhibition because the essays are provocative, the works and men documented are often quite unknown to the nonspecialist in the United States, and the many plates are not to be found together in even any several volumes. Michel Florisoone's essay, for instance, could well be read by those who have struggled to find a dichotomy in spirit between what is known as Neo-Classicism and Romanticism in the arts in the United States in this period. He sees Neo-Classicism as part of the Romantic movement. He reminds us that the Neo-Classicist and the Romanticist were of one mind in refusing to accept the world of the rococo style—or for that matter, which is more telling in our case, the political and social world it typified. While the Neo-Classicist wished to arrest the movement of life and the Romantic wanted to capture what was fleeting many artists were both either at the same time or in succeeding phases. This does not satisfy the question of differences in style, of course.

To center our attention on what European Romantic art says about American Romantic art, I shall confine myself to the paintings. American Romantic painting has three characteristics, two of which are not uniquely American. The third may not be uniquely American either, but it gives rise to some especially interesting questions about American culture.

The first characteristic of our painting of the period was that it was provincial, it was in the farther reaches of Western world art. An art is provincial if the response to it is determined largely by whether or not the viewer is of the province from which the art derives. The response to art in the mainstream of the Western world is not affected by the province (or the nation) of the viewer. One is prone to find more in a landscape painting when it is of a country one knows just as a genre painting is more apt to please when one can place the scene in its historical context. The associations one brings to a work of art do make a difference even though some aestheticians may declare they should not.

Someone viewing the same two paintings who is not of the province of their origin and thus is without a store of associations will judge them on their technical achievement. Not having American paintings for my purposes in the Tate exhibition, I had to use the provincial art of other nations. The first day the show was open to the public I attempted to get a sense of the reaction of the viewers. It was a warm day and the viewers, being predominately English, were decorous. Apparently, many of the paintings seemed quaint. They were seeing much that was unfamiliar or that they had tended to slight in galleries because it was unfashionable. If seeing many such works in a heralded exhibition disturbed them they had their reviewers who reassured them that many of the works were not very good. This was only as it should be, for exhibitions break new paths of acceptancy.

Now the great Romantic art infuses the particular with the passionate insight that John Piper proclaims. Without the passion it is provincial, with it it can be universal or universal to the Western world at least. There was no question but the English and the French showed off much the best in the Tate. The English journalists were relieved that this particular Council of Europe show was designated for London because the Romantic period is the one in which England takes a high place. No landscapes of the period are more imbued with passion than a Turner. On the other hand, the quality of the exotic comes through magnificently in a Delacroix. Both nations had giants, but they also had second-rank artists who are still of international importance. The German states were in a different position. They had no giants, but they had second-rank artists who are little known by the layman outside of Germany. After this exhibition a German scholar is not apt to express surprise over an American searching in a Munich bookstore for books on David Caspar Friedrich. Each English reviewer that I read commented upon Friedrich's work. The eternal stillness of his non-naturalistic, yet Germanic, landscape was the product of an imagination passionate enough to arrest the non-German who views it.

America would have no Constables, Turners, Delacroixs or Gericaults to bring to the Tate. Whether we have any Friedrichs is a fascinating conjecture. Would a George Caleb Bingham boatman scene have made it? What would a non-American have found in Washington Alston, Thomas Cole, William Sidney Mount? Would he have found anything more than we would find in the Norwegian Johan Christian Dahl or the Spanish Leonardo Alenza? Both painted works which their nations can take delight in but which have never made the mainstream. We will know more about our culture if we can ever find reasons other than the accidents of genius as to why we did not have Melvilles, Poes and Hawthornes in the graphic arts in that midpoint of the nineteenth century. To dismiss the question by saying that Romanticism was primarily a literary movement is to beg it. After all American culture before 1850 is considered to have strong affiliations with that of England which was having its great period in painting.

Finding respectable examples from American painting of the principal themes around which the exhibition was built is not difficult. These themes were Light, the Pastoral, Italianate Landscape, Mountains, "Feeling," Satire and Horror, Death and the Supernatural, Revival of Religious Art, Wild Animals and the Cult of the Exotic, the Legendary Past and the Romantic Interpretation of the Poets. There is, however, a sharp falling off in several of these themes. As one left a narrow, dark gallery used effectively for paintings to illustrate Wild Animals and the Cult of the Exotic where French and Italian painters such as Chasseriau and Carnovali had their day, one emerged into a series, one behind the other, of galleries of monumental proportions. In them large canvases were shown around the themes of Images of Power, Nationalism and the Cult of the Hero, and Heroism and Liberty.

We had our painters of large canvases on subjects such as The Landing of the Pilgrims and The Declaration of Independence, but they were criticized even in their own day by Americans for their lack of power, their fussiness. Our paintings of the institutions of democracy were most effective when they were anecdotal in the genre tradition of Bingham. His "The County Election" in the City Art Museum of St. Louis is hardly a glorification of the state as an abstraction, however. Sheer power as a theme, such as that of the icy world of Friedrich's "The Wreck of the 'Hope' " (Fig. 1) is quite unknown. Here a single natural object was the means by which the artist expressed the power of the irrational. It is the expression of the irrational where the Romantic left the too easily defined universe of the Enlightenment behind. We had a white whale in our literature but not in our painting.

Fig. 1. "The Wreck of the 'Hope'"
by David Caspar Friedrich (1774-1840) (Kunsthalle, Hamburg)

Fig. 2. "Bonaparte Crossing the St. Bernard Pass" by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) (Musée National de Malmaison)

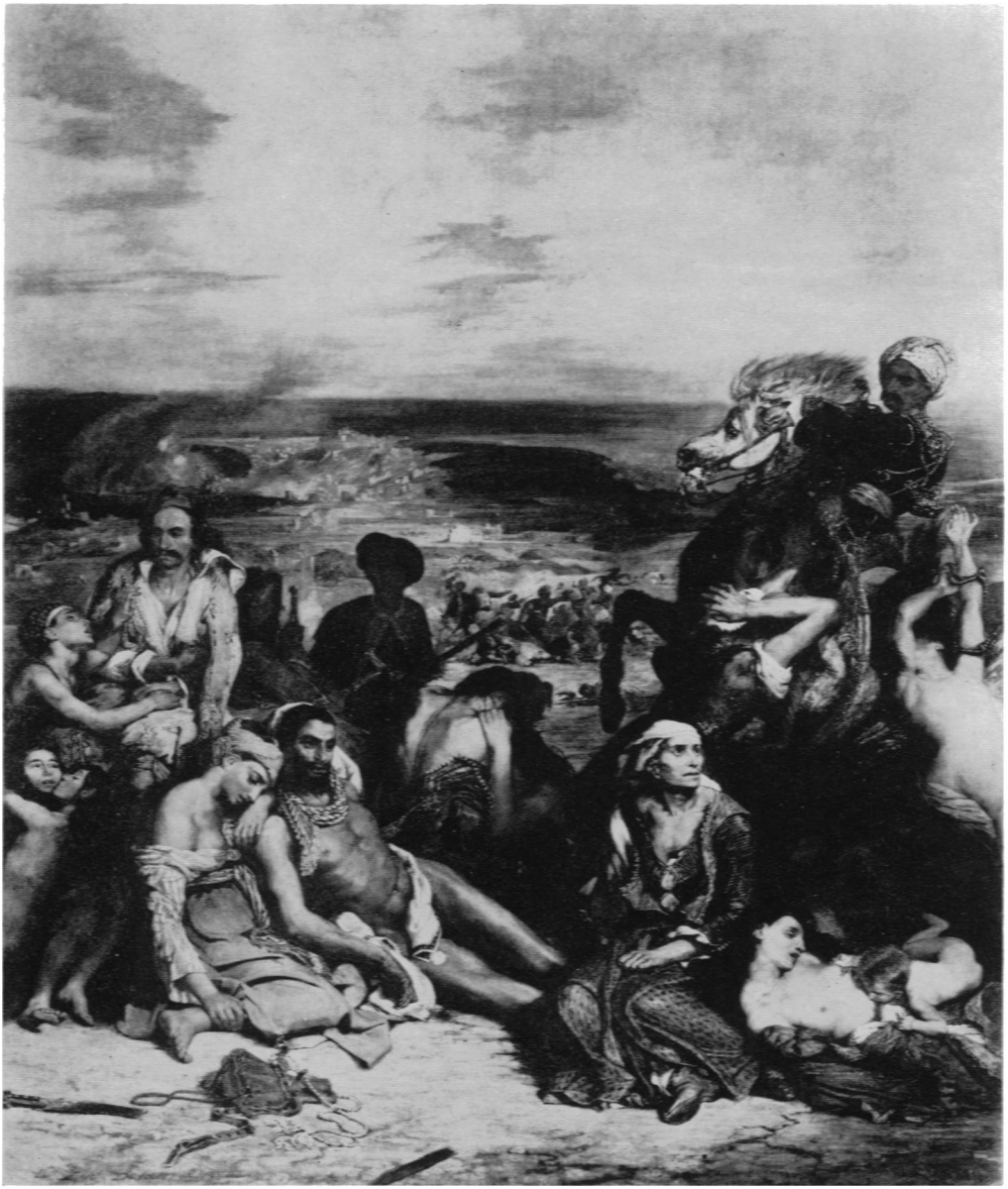

Fig. 3. "Scenes of the Massacre at Chios: A Greek Family Awaiting Death or Slavery" by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) (Musée du Louvre)

True, many of our artists had little technical preparation for a career of painting. When one uses yards of canvas to paint a tiger, it has to be a good tiger. Those who teach beginning art students spend the first months trying to get them to dare to make the big stroke. Could it also be a timidity induced by a genteel middle-class society out of which most of our painters and patrons came in this period? Was there a still more underlying cause?

Sir Kenneth wrote in his essay that some of the manifestations of Romanticism in the world of action, i.e., nationalism and the rise of power, have been doubtful blessings to humanity. While we idealized Washington we have nothing to compare with the overpowering "Napoleon" by Jacques-Louis David (Fig. 2). There is no American painting, on the other side of the coin, which objectifies human misery whether it be the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the New Orleans slave market, or the Irish slums in New York City. Americans with a Romantic conscience like Samuel Gridley Howe went to fight with the Greeks against the Turks but no artist among us was able to capture the cause as did Delacroix in his "Scenes of the Massacre at Chios: A Greek Family Awaiting Death or Slavery" (Fig. 3).

Certainly there were many among us who gloried in the powers of the nation. It was the century of Manifest Destiny. Power as an irrational force was sensed by some. Thoreau listened for a different drummer and Thomas Cole drafted "Verdura," a vision of the United States at the close of the twentieth century when the world was filled with outrage and wrong. But power as an irrational force was not expressed in our visual arts. Perhaps our artists could not paint the Rubenesque scene of a Delacroix, but do we answer all questions by pleading the American lack of genius or craftsmanship? Does our failure to express that side of Romanticism in painting grow out of something in American society of the period? Does it have something to say about American culture in general? These are questions to be asked here, not answered. One thing is certain, an exhibition such as "The Romantic Movement" is most rewarding to those interested in cultural studies.

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