

A similar theme in works of neoclassical and romantic

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The genesis of Neoclassical Art and that of Romantic Art thrived in close proximity as far as chronology was concerned.

Neoclassicism or Neo-Classicism marked the revival of Classical interests in literature, visual arts, music, theater and architecture between the mid-eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Mainly canonical works of ancient Greek and Roman times were reproduced by the neoclassicists, but not without experimenting with their own impressions and improvisations. Maintaining the tradition of a culture which was rich and opulent in the past was a major objective of the neoclassical craftsmen.

But the Romantic genre of decorative and performing art, which hit the scene in the eighteenth century Western Europe, was a trendsetter in its own rights. While neoclassicism dealt with the resurgence of the antique ideal that was conceived of by Virgil, Raphael and many other eminent artists, the Romantic Movement was a reaction against the severities of reality and rationalization. Naturalistic cultural expressions were regained and given newer dimensions by the neoclassicists.

On the contrary, the Romantics escaped from the sternness of routine life by delving into fanciful musings on nature in its untamed form. The point of resemblance between both these movements can be found in their dealing with aesthetics of art and subjective virtues. This essay is going to compare and contrast between two archetypal artworks from the eighteenth century Neoclassical and Romantic genres.

The eighteenth century Europe was woken up from a slumber of inertia when the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann showered accolades

on the ingenuity and authenticity of the ancient Greek sculptor in his essay *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture), published in 1755. While this treatise concerned only the Neoclassical frameworks of art, our proposed course of study in this paper is going to be based on finding a common theme from the Neoclassical and the Romantic era.

The basic problem in doing so is to excogitate a way to match the sublimities of ancient Greek tastes and preferences with the realism of the Romantic Europe. Subject matter, style and period played a pivotal role in shaping the vision of the neoclassical artist.[1] Moreover, fastidiousness over maintaining the class is a definitive neoclassical approach. Now if we take into account the cultural influence as well as the artistic nuances of a given work of art, we are unlikely to appreciate it insightfully.[2] These two parameters are independent of each other in that the former has nothing to do with the artist's vision and objective.

The cultural precondition exists in the subconscious of the creator while he goes about his business with the brush and the canvas. The same holds true for the Romantic artist as well. Sublimity, as claimed by Prager,[3] is essentially a romantic quality. The Romantic preoccupation with aesthetics analyzes the underlying meaning of the theme which is being worked upon, and makes a differentiation between sublime and beautiful. But the paradigmatic cases of neoclassical painting do not distinguish between these two viewpoints. By and large, what stands out in any typical neoclassical

artwork is its chastity of emotion and lofty ideals that are reflective of the root source and time.

Mother of the Gracchi by Angelica Kauffmann is widely regarded to be a representative work of the eighteenth century neoclassical age. Being a trained and well-cultivated painter, Kauffmann was extremely scrupulous about the subtleties of expression and proper treatment of the theme.

Hence, Mother of the Gracchi goes beyond the lifeless imitation of a Classical theme at a latter period. Drawing inspiration from the classical Greek and Roman history and literature, Kauffmann repudiated the ancient characters and replaced them with modern ones. The settings too were changed so that the modernistic charm of the neoclassical period could be retained.

Revered as an *exemplum virtutis* (example or model of virtue),^[4] this artwork superseded the more flaunty and playful rococo style both in the gravity of theme as well as in taste. This painting thematically concerns the virtue of Cornelia, mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. It displays motherly affection in its most profound manner as Cornelia is seen bringing her two sons as jewels to a visitor who is seated.

The Romantic artwork we have picked up in our present study is Alexander Cozens' paintings. Just as Kauffmann belonged to a learned community of painters, Cozens too was aware of the systematic and accurate drawing procedures from the very beginning of his career as a painter.

His works were largely influenced and shaped by his prolonged academic tenure in Italy, where he had to make topographical pen

and wash drawings in oil. The salient features of Cozens' works included "speed and spontaneity in execution" along with a firm focus on the subject at hand.[5]

While it is a daunting task to compare and contrast between two entirely different schools of painting, it would be worth taking a look, first of all, at the similarities. In many ways, Cozens' works captured the pastoral beauty of nature in its unblemished form. Albeit Kauffmann addressed to a historical theme, she portrayed Cornelia as emblematic of Mother Nature.

Moreover, Cozens' drawings continue to evoke a sense of awe and bewilderment among contemporary critics for their taste and sublimity. Like Kauffmann, he too was able to convey his powerful feelings by using select washes of a few basic colors.

Now if we are to look into the contrasting aspects of the Neoclassical and the Romantic artworks, we should be beginning with the cultural remnants of the Classical times that shaped the neoclassical attitude towards painting. It was imperative that Kauffmann should incorporate the Roman architectural patterns in Mother of the Gracchi – a compulsion Alexander Cozens did not have to pay attention to.

Again, the spontaneous flow of emotions, which is so typical of the Romantic movement at large, are missing in the neoclassical paintings. It was as if the neoclassicists were more preoccupied by the exactness of form than by imbining a sense of freedom and expressionism into their works.

Much in sync with the prerequisites of the Romantics, Cozens was a visionary poet who could blend colors with subtle use of light and shade to render a mystic charm to his works. But Kauffmann had to follow stricter rules and norms set by the earlier trends of the Classicism. However, the use of symbolism was more prominent and effective in *Mother of the Gracchi* and other neoclassical works than what was observed in the works of Cozens.

[1] Kleiner et al., p. 767

[2] Binkley, p. 12

[3] Prager, p. 93

[4] Kleiner et al., p. 767

[5] Murray, p. 227