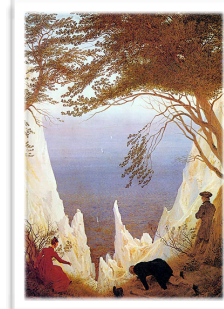


## Romanticism an Art Movement



# QUARANTINE



## Finding inspiration in art in time of quarantine

Greetings to you dear reader, I hope you stay safe and healthy during this time of quarantine, or shall we say, our current state of enforced isolation. Although a necessary action as to prevent the further spread of COVID19, at times it can prove to be difficult, frustrating and emotionally challenging as some of us might feel as prisoners being forced to live in solitary confinement. Let us not despair and instead let us embark on a quest for inspiration in art, more specifically, let us find inspiration in the landscape paintings of romantic artists. What can we learn from them and their landscapes and how can we use that to our advantage?

*“The importance of Romanticism is that it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world”*  
(Isaiah Berlin)

Whereas we are restrained to a current state of isolation, solitary confinement and loneliness, Romantic landscape artists were in search for exactly these circumstances in the realm of nature. The Romantics highlighted the importance of nature and the healing power of the imagination. They truly believed that

only through a state of solitary confinement in the realm of nature, we would be able to transcend our troubles and circumstances, and as such discover ourselves. Although in quarantine, in The Netherlands we have the fortune of being able to go outside, have a walk, enjoy the weather and be close to nature. Let us use this freedom to our advantage, go outside, feel nature and rediscover our desires and passions.

## Romantic Landscape Paintings

Romanticism is a complex intellectual, artistic and literary movement having its roots in the last decade of the eighteenth century. During Romanticism, the attitudes towards art and life in general experienced profound changes which influenced the Western thought and beliefs up to the present day. From the beginning, Romanticism was seen as a project having the future in mind, crossing borders and projecting concepts of transgression and openness was something inherent to it.

The project of Romanticism appears to be unfinished even today, as the visual arts continue to be affected by its ideals and principles. Let us take for example the exposition *Imaginary Landscapes*, that took place at Museum Helmond (13 October 2019 – 16 February 2020). Fascinating exposition in which nature was presented as the main protagonist as to confront the spectator with its incredible and sublime majesty. In this exposition, artists explored nature through its landscapes or placed it within a conceptual framework. These contemporary landscapes combined the high and low culture, the past and present, social circumstances, text and image, emotions and melancholy and even hypnotising landscape animations.

This exposition of imaginary landscapes was presented as a prelude to the current landscape paintings exposition that is taking place at Museum Helmond, namely, *Lucas Gassel, master of landscapes*. Although at this moment not available as museums are closed to the public due to the Corona virus quarantine, hopefully museums will soon open their doors to the public. What is interesting about this exposition is its uniqueness, this being the first time that an extensive exposition was created with only artworks of Lucas Gassel. This 16<sup>th</sup> century extraordinary artist can be considered as one of the first landscape painters. In his paintings, nature plays a prominent role, as he portrays fantastical and sublime landscape, nature in its magnificent glory, the kind of landscape that you would expect to see in the artworks of Romanticist painters such as John Constable or Caspar David Friedrich. Could they have been inspired by Gassel?

## *The landscapes of Lucas Gassel*

Museum Helmond

At a first sight the landscape paintings of Lucas Gassel seem to portray tranquil landscapes with rocky mountains, rivers and trees, with villages, castles and busy people going about their busy life on a normal sunny day. At a closer look and if we take the time to examine his multi-layer paintings we will be surprised at the amount of stories, messages and details that are to be unveiled. In his magnificent landscapes Gassel has been able to interconnect the majesty of nature with the quotidian and at the same time with a Biblical and/or mythological story.

Through a close study of Gassel's paintings one will discover that Gassel is a meticulous and thoughtful painter, that prepares in detail the story and content of his paintings way before bringing them to life. This is seen in the amount of hidden signs, symbols and stories that his paintings entail. Furthermore, Gassel introduces the viewer not to one but to three distinct layers, namely, the foreground, the middle layer and the background.

Gassel is a storyteller and his paintings act as the perfect podium for the development of any narrative that can easily unfold in front of our eyes through the layers of his painting, from this point of view, we can easily see that his paintings share the same construction as that of ancient Greek plays.

Just like in a Greek play, in Gassel's paintings we encounter ourselves with a prologue, in which one or more characters introduce the drama of the story, in the case of Gassel's paintings the prologue being the foreground of the painting, where the main figures introduce the subject matter of the painting. The prologue is followed by the parados and the stasima, parts in which the story unfolds through three or more episodes - the middle layer of Lucas's paintings does just that, it allows the stories of the main account to unfold, here one or several subjects act as anecdotes that support the main narrative in an immediate way. Greek plays end with the exodus, closure of the story. The exodus of Gassel's paintings is definitely visible in the background layer, the landscape itself, that intertwines the whole succession of scenes and binds the composition as a whole.

Captivating exposition, worth seeing!



Lucas Gassel

The Romantic movement had a profound interest in the natural world and a distinctive passion for picturesque and landscape environments. The importance of nature and its depiction in Romantic landscape paintings has been of keen relevance in the work of Romantic painters such as John Constable, Joseph M.W Turner and of course Caspar David Friedrich. In their paintings the depiction of nature comes with connotations of self discovery, inner fulfilment and transcendence to a higher level of understanding. As such, we emerge ourselves in provocative and poetic counter-worlds in which we can escape the quotidian life and redefine our relationship between ourselves as individuals and nature.

Romantic artists considered nature to be the mediator through which God's laws could be grasped and comprehended. By rejecting rational thought and intellect, and embracing the subjective experience and the appeal to their emotions, romantic artists were able to get a better understanding of the lessons learned from nature. Romantics felt free to modify nature's appearance as a means of evoking higher states of mind and release their imagination. As such, Romantic artists transformed the experience of nature and portrayed in their paintings their inner thoughts and feelings.

Constable's landscape paintings denote a feeling of tranquillity and peace, a kind of divine harmony of the physical world through the innocent eyes of a child. The most predominant feature of his landscape paintings is the land work, with people fertilising the ground, using animals to plough the field, with mills in which the grain is ground and boats in which the grain is transported via canals to the city. For him the main source of artistic inspiration was his childhood vision of nature. Progressively in his work he was able to recapture the essence of his childhood vision in an innocent and pure manner, while, at the same time, re-examine his original vision of a childhood memory from a mature reflection.



Appealing to Constable's vision of nature, we could submerge ourselves in nature as a means of rediscovering our passions through an all-embracing analysis of our childhood dreams and aspirations. This might take a bit of mental digging. Chances are we all wanted to be many different things when we were young. What made us be interested in those dreams and do those passions still connect to our current life?

Unlike Constable's work, the landscape paintings of the Romantic artist Joseph Mallord William Turner denote a sense of maturity and personal feelings, though in a different and more ambiguous way. Turner had no sensitive attachment to places, he never established a permanent home, he was more interested in places where he could observe the interplay of his favourite natural phenomena. In his paintings Turner depicts nature's dramatic contours and effects, with avalanches, storms, atmospheres presented in violent motions, mountain sceneries and waterfalls. His landscapes inspire an overwhelming feeling of the supremacy of nature over the helplessness of man in front of natural events.



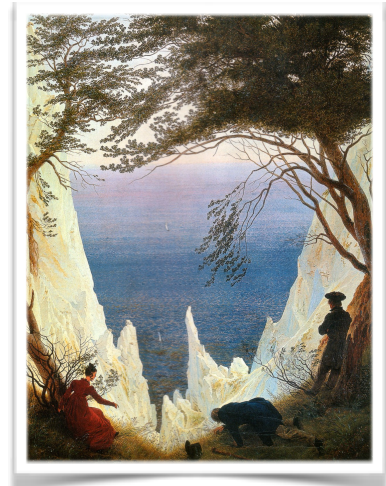
Turner was a realist, an innovator, he was recognised as an artistic genius. In his landscapes we are confronted with the forces and forms of nature, these are no conventional landscapes, but rather futuristic, an expression of experimentation and innovation.

Per definition, what we can learn from Turner is that not adhering to the conventional but rather to the unconventional, do the things you always wanted to do but did not have the courage or time for. Be creative, get



inspired, experiment new things, learn new things, use your imagination, create a new product or even a new business.

Romantic landscape paintings gained true significance through the work of Caspar David Friedrich. His landscape paintings contain a dual aesthetic category which moves between beauty and sublimity. Therefore, in his landscapes Friedrich is able to integrate both the beauty of nature from Constable's work and the overwhelming image of nature from Turner's landscapes. While the beautiful aspect of nature is enhanced by the presence of solitary figures in quest for self discovery through a process of contemplating nature, the sublimity of nature is emphasised by contrasting nature's magnitude to the small size of the human body, creating in this way a feeling of helplessness in front of natural events.



The landscapes in Friedrich's paintings are not exact reproductions of real panorama. When creating a new painting Friedrich would start by making a sketch of the view he would like to portray, then, in his studio, he would rearrange the setting in order to fit with the mood he wished to convey. In order to increase a viewer's fear of heights, the slope of a mountain might appear to be steeper and higher than it actually was, as it happens for example in Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. In this painting, Friedrich portrays a solitary figure viewed from behind while kneeling down in an attempt to measure the depth of the cliff which is not measurable for the viewer (the figures depicted in his landscapes can generally see more than the spectator), although a sense of the depth is still perceived.

Friedrich's work contains a tone of intimacy and mystery, with allegorical landscapes and contemplative figures silhouetted against night skies, dreamlike atmospheres and Gothic ruins. The significance and the detail of his landscapes appears to be the end product of an arduous and solitary examination. Friedrich was against the notion of authority and maintained the inner conviction that the private judgement of the individual was the only guide for the interpretation of nature. These words can be rightly applied to his own work, because in his work Friedrich expresses emotions and thoughts which he could not translate into words.

In his paintings, Friedrich is on a quest for self discovery, a quest which is represented on the one hand, through a process of contemplating nature, and on the other hand, through religious connotations of metaphysical despair (there is no God, no order in the world outside, is an alien and indifferent world towards the human beings). In his oil paintings, nature can be seen as the setting for religious experience or religious fulfilment. Many of his paintings depict physical symbols of religious structures in decay, as for example, swamped cemeteries or monasteries in ruins. These images suggest the idea that even in the absence of an organised church the spiritual needs can be fulfilled in nature.

As far as for our current state of isolation and social distancing, even in the absence of free, unrestricted social gatherings, meeting with friends and even with family members, we could get inspired by Friedrich's artworks and use this time of quarantine as a means to connect with our spiritual needs, turn to nature and get in touch with and embrace our inner self.

Stay safe and healthy! Enjoy nature and discover yourself!



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## Appendix of Artworks



*The White Horse*

John Constable

1818 - 19

Oil on canvas - 127 x 183 cm

Widener Collection



*Judah and Tamar*

Lucas Gassel

1548

Oil on Pannel - 79 x 114 cm

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien





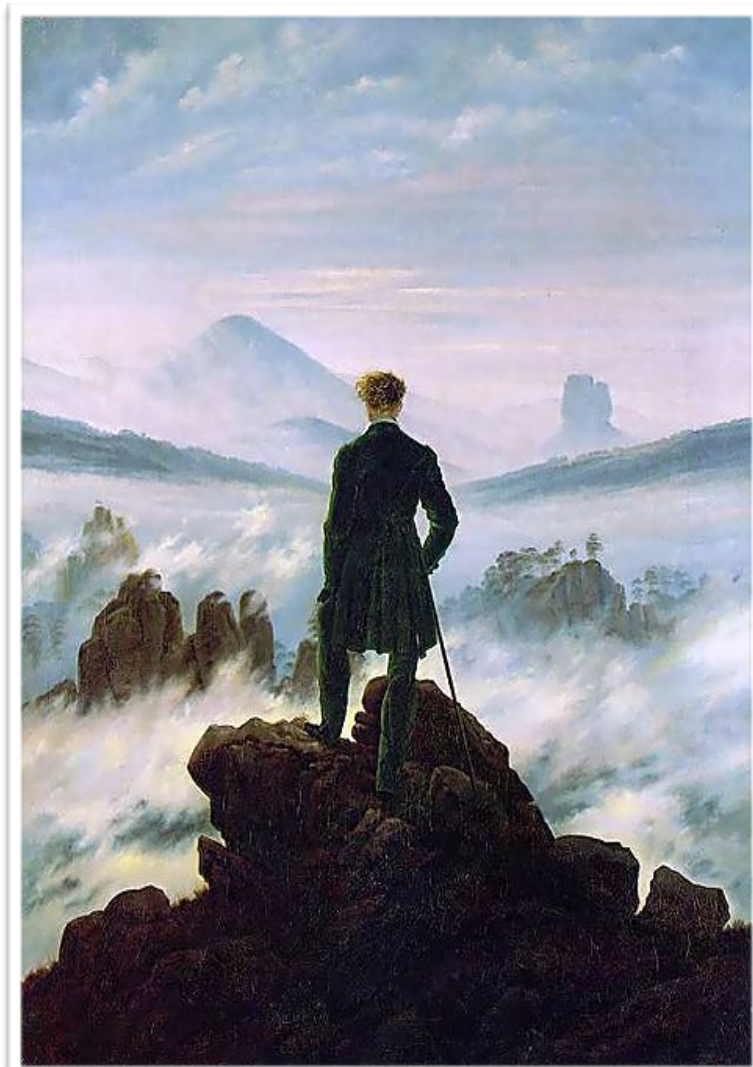
*Kreidefelsen auf Rügen*

Caspar David Friedrich

1818

Oil on Canvas – 90'5 x 71 cm

Museum Oskar Reinhart, Stadtgarten



*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*

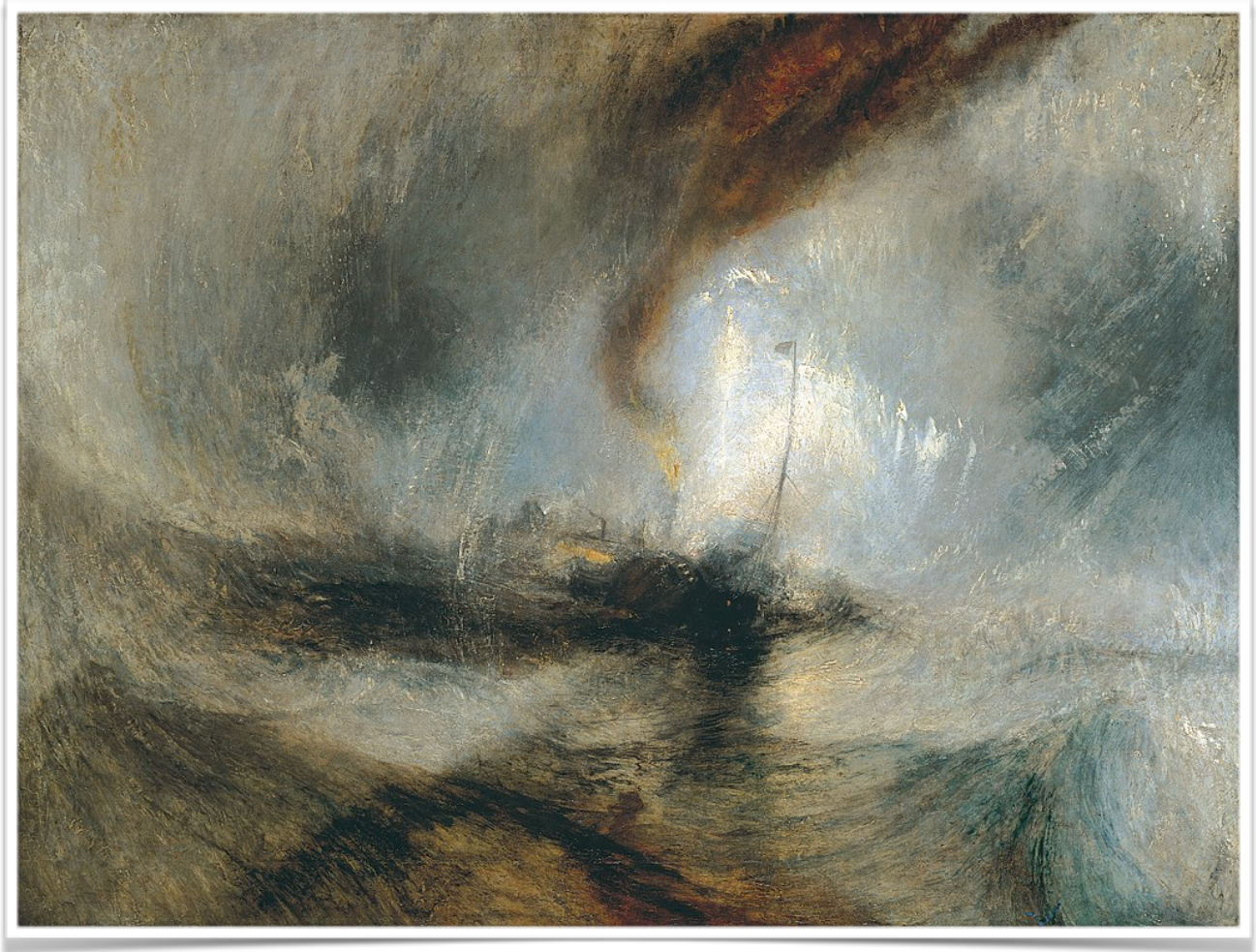
Caspar David Friedrich

1818

Oil on Canvas – 98,4 x 74,8 cm

Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg





*Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*

Joseph Mallord William Turner,

1842

Oil on Canvas - 91 x 122 cm

Tate, London