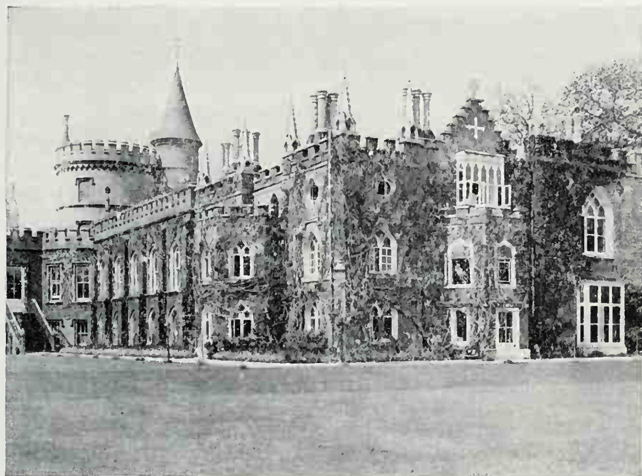
THE STORY OF ART

BY E·H·GOMBRICH

PHAIDON

CHAPTER 24 · THE BREAK IN TRADITION

England, America and France
Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

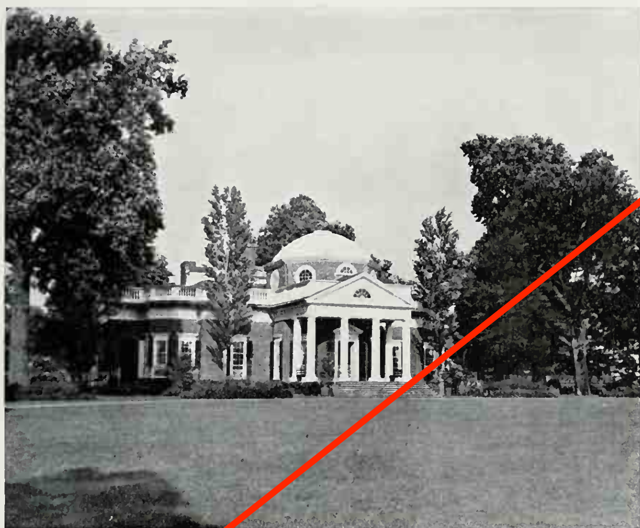


302. *A neo-Gothic Villa: Strawberry Hill,* built by WALPOLE, BENTLEY and CHUTE about 1750–75

IN history books, modern times begin with the discovery of America by Columbus in 1492. We remember the importance of that period in art. It was the time of the Renaissance, the time when being a painter or a sculptor ceased to be an occupation like any other and became a calling set apart. It was also the period during which the Reformation, through its fight against images in churches, put an end to the most frequent use of pictures and sculptures in large parts of Europe, and forced the artists to look for a new market. But however important all these events were, they did not result in a sudden break. The large mass of artists were still organized in guilds and companies, they still had apprentices like other artisans, and they still relied for commissions largely on the wealthy aristocracy who needed the artists to decorate their castles and country seats, and to add their portraits to the ancestral galleries. Even after 1492, in other words, art retained a natural place in the life of people of leisure, and was generally taken for granted as something one could not well do without. Even though fashions changed and artists

set themselves different problems, some being more interested in harmonious arrangements of figures, others in the matching of colours or the achievement of dramatic expression, the purpose of painting or sculpture remained in general the same, and no one seriously questioned it. This purpose was to supply beautiful things for people who wanted them and enjoyed them. There were, it is true, various schools of thought who quarrelled among themselves over what 'Beauty' meant and whether it was enough to enjoy the skilful imitation of nature for which Caravaggio, the Dutch painters, or men like Gainsborough, had become famous, or whether true beauty did not depend on the capacity of the artist to 'idealize' nature as Raphael, Carracci, Reni or Reynolds were supposed to have done. But these disputes need not make us forget how much common ground there was among the disputants, and how much between the artists whom they chose as their favourites. Even the 'idealists' agreed that the artist must study nature and learn to draw from the nude, even the 'naturalists' agreed that the works of classical antiquity were unsurpassed in beauty.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century this common ground seemed gradually to disappear. We have reached the really modern times which dawned when the French Revolution of 1789 put an end to so many of the assumptions that had been taken for granted for hundreds, if not for thousands, of years. Just as the Great Revolution has its roots in the Age of Reason, so have the changes in man's ideas about art. The first of these changes concerns the artist's attitude to what is called 'Style'. There is a character in one of Molière's comedies who is greatly astonished when he is told that he had spoken prose all his life without knowing it. Something a little similar happened to the artists of the eighteenth century. In former times, the style of the period was simply the way in which things were done, adopted because people thought it was the best and most correct way of achieving certain effects. In the Age of Reason, people began to become self-conscious about style and styles. Many architects were still convinced, as we have seen, that the rules laid down in the books by Palladio guaranteed the 'right' style for elegant buildings. But once you turn to text-books for such questions it is almost inevitable that there will be others who say: 'Why must it be just Palladio's style?' This is what happened in England in the course of the eighteenth century. Among the most sophisticated connoisseurs there were some who wanted to be different from the others. The most characteristic of these English gentlemen of leisure who spent their time thinking about style and the rules of taste was the famous Horace Walpole, son of the first Prime Minister of England. It was Walpole who decided that it was boring to have his country house on Strawberry Hill built just like any other correct Palladian villa. He had a taste for the quaint and romantic, and was notorious for his whimsicality. It was quite in keeping with his character that he decided to have Strawberry Hill built in the Gothic style like a castle from the romantic past (Fig. 302). At the



305. *Monticello (Virginia).* Built by THOMAS JEFFERSON between 1796 and 1806

new-born Athens. When Napoleon, posing as the champion of the ideas of the Revolution, rose to power in Europe, the 'neo-classical' style of architecture became the style of the *Empire*. On the Continent, too, a Gothic revival existed side by side with this new revival of the pure Greek style. It appealed particularly to those Romantic minds who despaired of the power of Reason to reform the world and longed for a return to what they called the Age of Faith.

In painting and sculpture, the break in the chain of tradition was perhaps less immediately perceptible than it was in architecture, but it was possibly of even greater consequence. Here, too, the roots of the trouble reach back far into the eighteenth century. We have seen how dissatisfied Hogarth was with the tradition of art as he found it, and how deliberately he set out to create a new kind of painting for a new public. We remember how Reynolds, on the other hand, was anxious to preserve that tradition as if he realized that it was in danger. The danger lay in the fact mentioned before, that painting had ceased to be an ordinary trade the knowledge of which was handed down from master to apprentice. Instead, it had become a subject like philosophy to be taught in academies. The very word 'academy' suggests this new approach. It is derived from the name of the villa in which the Greek philosopher Plato taught his disciples, and was gradually applied to gatherings of learned men in search of wisdom. Artists at first called their meeting places

'academies' to stress that equality with scholars on which they set such great store; but it was only in the eighteenth century that these academies gradually took over the function of teaching art to students. Thus, the old methods by which the great masters of the past had learned their trade by grinding colours and assisting their elders, had fallen into decline. No wonder that academic teachers like Reynolds felt compelled to urge young students to study diligently the masterpieces of the past and to assimilate their technical skill. The academies of the eighteenth century were under royal patronage, to manifest the interest which the King took in the arts in his realm. But, for the arts to flourish, it is perhaps less important that they should be taught in Royal Institutions than that there should be enough people willing to buy paintings or sculptures by living artists.

It was here that the main difficulties arose, because the very emphasis on the greatness of the masters of the past, which was favoured by the academies, made patrons inclined to buy old masters rather than to commission paintings from the living. As a remedy, the academies, first in Paris, then in London, began to arrange annual exhibitions of the works of their members. Today we are so used to the idea of artists painting and sculptors modelling their work mainly with the idea of sending them to an exhibition to attract the attention of art critics and to find buyers, that we may find it hard to realize what a momentous change this was. These annual exhibitions were social events that formed the topic of conversation in polite society, and made and unmade reputations. Instead of working for individual patrons whose wishes they understood, or for the general public, whose taste they could gauge, artists had now to work for success in a show where there was always a danger of the spectacular and pretentious outshining the simple and sincere. The temptation was indeed great for artists to attract attention by selecting melodramatic subjects for their paintings, and by relying on size and loud colour effects to impress the public. Thus it is not surprising that some genuine artists despised the 'official' art of the academies, and that the clash of opinions between those whose gifts allowed them to appeal to the public taste and those who found themselves excluded, threatened to destroy the common ground on which all art had so far developed.

Perhaps the most immediate and visible effect of this profound crisis was that artists everywhere looked for new types of subject-matter. In the past, the subject-matter of paintings had been very much taken for granted. If we walk round our galleries and museums we soon discover how many of the paintings illustrate identical topics. The majority of the older pictures, of course, represent religious subjects taken from the Bible, and the legends of the saints. But even those that are secular in character are mostly confined to a few selected themes. There are the mythologies of ancient Greece with their stories of the loves and quarrels of the gods; there are the heroic tales from Rome with their examples of valour and self-sacrifice; and there are, finally, the allegorical subjects illustrating some general

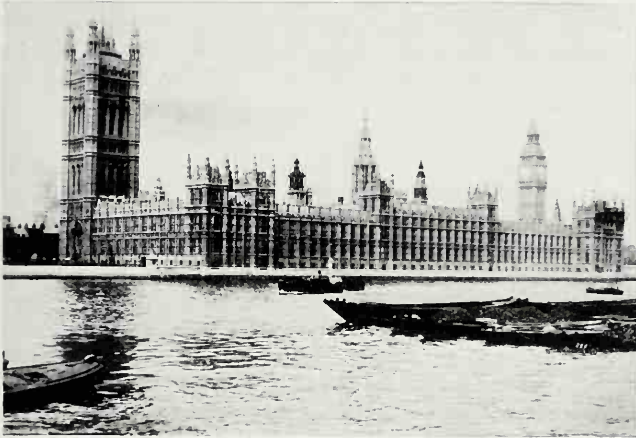
306. COPLEY: *Charles I demanding the Surrender of the five impeached M.P.s.* 1785. Boston, Public Library

truth by means of personifications. It is curious how rarely artists before the middle of the eighteenth century strayed from these narrow limits of illustration, how rarely they painted a scene from a romance, or an episode of medieval or contemporary history. All this changed very rapidly during the period of the French Revolution. Suddenly artists felt free to choose as their subjects anything from a Shakespearian scene to a topical event, anything, in fact, that appealed to the imagination and aroused interest. This disregard for the traditional subject-matters of art may have been the only thing the successful artists of the period and the lonely rebels had in common.

It is hardly an accident that this breakaway from the established traditions of European art was partly accomplished by artists who had come to Europe from across the ocean—Americans who worked in England. Obviously these men felt less bound to the hallowed customs of the Old World and were readier to try new experiments. The American John Singleton Copley (1737–1815) is a typical artist of this group. Fig. 306 shows one of his large paintings which caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in 1785. The subject was indeed an unusual one. The Shakespearian scholar Malone, a friend of the politician Edmund Burke, had suggested it to the painter and provided him with all the historical information necessary. He was to paint the famous incident when Charles I demanded from the House of Commons the arrest of five impeached members, and when the Speaker challenged the King's authority and declined to surrender them. Such an episode from comparatively recent history had never been made the subject of a large

CHAPTER 25 · REVOLUTION IN PERMANENCE

The Nineteenth Century



318. *A nineteenth-century 'state' building: the Houses of Parliament, London.* Designed by BARRY and A. W. N. PUGIN in 1835

WHAT I have called the break in tradition, which marks the period of the Great Revolution in France, was bound to change the whole situation in which artists lived and worked. The academies and exhibitions, the critics and connoisseurs, had done their best to introduce a distinction between Art with a capital A and the mere exercise of a craft, be it that of the painter or the builder. Now these foundations on which art had rested throughout its existence were being undermined from another side. The Industrial Revolution began to destroy the very traditions of solid craftsmanship; handiwork gave way to machine production, the workshop to the factory.

The most immediate results of this change were visible in architecture. The lack of solid craftsmanship, combined with a strange insistence on 'style' and 'beauty', nearly killed it. The amount of building done in the nineteenth century was probably greater than in all former periods taken together. It was the time of the vast expansion of cities in Europe and America that turned whole tracts of country into 'built-up areas'. But this time of unlimited building activity had no natural style of its own. The rules of thumb and pattern books, which had so admirably served

319. DELACROIX: *Arabic Fantasy*. First exhibited in the Salon of 1834. Montpellier, Musée Fabry

The history of nineteenth-century painting, as we usually see it today, is really the history of a handful of such sincere men whose integrity of purpose led them to defy convention, not in order to gain notoriety, but so that they might explore new possibilities undreamt of by previous generations.

The stage on which these dramatic clashes took place was the art world of Paris. For, in the nineteenth century, Paris had become a centre of painting much as Florence had been in the fifteenth century, and Rome in the seventeenth. The history of France since the Great Revolution is punctuated by a series of successive overthrows of the established order in 1830, 1848 and 1871. The history of painting in Paris looks somewhat similar. There, too, we have successive waves of revolution, each generation trying to sweep away yet more of the conventions in which the official art of the academies had got stuck.

The first of these rebels was born in the eighteenth century. He was Eugène Delacroix (1799–1863). Delacroix revolted against the school of David (p. 365, Fig. 307) and the standards for which it stood. He had no patience with all the talk about the Greeks and Romans, with the insistence on correct drawing, and the constant imitation of classical statues. He believed that, in painting, colour was much more important than draughtsmanship, and imagination than knowledge. While David and his school cultivated the Grand Manner and admired Poussin and Raphael, Delacroix shocked the connoisseurs by preferring the Venetians and

329. PISSARRO: *The Boulevard Montmartre*. 1897. Washington, National Gallery of Art

The feeling of a new freedom and a new power which these artists had must have been truly exhilarating; it must have compensated them for much of the derision and hostility they encountered. Suddenly the whole world offered fit subjects to the painter's brush. Wherever he discovered a beautiful combination of tones, an interesting configuration of colours and forms, a satisfying and gay patchwork of sunlight and coloured shades, he could set down his easel and try to transfer his impression on to the canvas. All the old bogeys of 'dignified subject-matter', of 'balanced compositions', of 'correct drawing' were laid to rest. The artist was responsible to no one but his own sensibilities for what he painted and how he painted it.

Perhaps painters would not have achieved this freedom so quickly and thoroughly had it not been for two allies which helped people of the nineteenth century to see the world with a different eye. One of these allies was photography. In the early days this invention had mainly been used for portraits. Very long exposures were necessary, and people who sat for their photographs had to be propped up in a rigid posture to be able to keep still so long. The development of the portable camera, and of the snapshot, began during the same years which also saw the rise