

An Introduction to the Art of the Sublime

Background Notes

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Claude Lorrain. *Landscape with an Imaginary View of Tivoli.*
1642, oil on copper. Courtauld Collection, London

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SUBLIME is derived from the Latin word for high, lofty, elevated. It was understood as a critical and aesthetic term in the anonymous Greek treatise, *Peri Hypsous*, (hypsos – height/elevation) formerly ascribed to the rhetorician **Casius Longinus** in the third century CE but now generally agreed to belong to the first century, possibly around 50 CE, as a description of *noble literature*. Whatever his name and origin, its author was certainly a rhetorician and a teacher of considerable intellect. His essay has an intimate tone, (it is addressed to a favourite pupil, a young Roman) and breadth of spirit. It stands more or less isolated in its own time, but has had a recurrent fascination for modern minds until the seventeenth century when its meaning was adapted somewhat to fit a ‘modern’ interpretation.

The Latin *sublimis* is the quality of greatness, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual or artistic. The term especially refers to a greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation.

“Whatever transports us with wonder is more effective than something which merely pleases us. When we are being persuaded, we are usually in control, but sublimity has an irresistible power over us” is the famous quote from Longinus, *On the Sublime* 1.2. It was understood as that which is most dignified, grand and powerfully emotive in literature.

The distinguishing mark of sublimity for Longinus is a certain quality of feeling. But he will not allow it to be simply identified with emotion, for not all emotions are true or noble. Only art can guard against exaggerated or misplaced feeling. Nevertheless, art plays second fiddle to genius in his thinking. He enumerates five sources of the Sublime which are:

1. Great thoughts 2. Noble feeling 3. Lofty figures 4. Diction 5. Arrangement

The first two, the crucial ones, are the gift of nature, not art. Longinus prefers the faults of a great spirit, a Homer, a Plato or Demosthenes, to the faultless mediocrity that is achieved by simply following rules. As a manifestation of divine power sublimity became associated with religion, as Longinus refers to Greek authors and to biblical sources such as Genesis. The ideas were expressed in Augustan architecture and sculpture.

Horace (65-8 BCE)

Educated in Rome and Athens, friend of Virgil and his circle under the patronage of Maecenas, he was known for his understanding of Dionysiac Ecstasy, and for attempting to match poetry to the catharsis of drama. He suggested “*Poesis ut pictura*” – poetry is like painting. This is the link for later adaptations. His poetry was described as “more lasting than bronze”. Within a century of his death he became a school classic and inspired other poets up to Alexander Pope in the eighteenth century.

‘I Commend

A level mind that grapples with what’s here and now

As for the rest, look on it as a river

One moment calm and tame

Gliding to meet the Tuscan sea, the next

Churning, a chaos of gouged rocks, torn tree trunks

Corpses and rubble of houses.

While the mountains and forests amplify

The roar, and pitiless rain exacerbates

The temper of the water. Call him happy

And Lord of his own soul who every evening

Can say, “Today I have lived”.

Tomorrow, Jove may blot the sky with pure sunshine, yet he cannot

Devalue what has been held as precious

Or tarnish or melt back

The Gold, the visiting hour has left behind.’

(Horace, *Odes*, 3.29. Translated James Michie)

The treatise of Longinus remained unknown, or exercised little influence, in later antiquity. The treatise was rediscovered in the sixteenth century. It was first published in Greek in 1554, then translated into Latin in 1572 and into English (by John Hall) in 1652. It made no great impression until the late seventeenth century when Boileau, the French arch-priest of Neo- Classicism, wrote a treatise which would eventually lead to the downfall of the popularity of Classicism, especially in England. The English were not really comfortable following French rules of art from the powerful French Academy and saw Longinus as a new ally.

As the eighteenth century advanced, the Sublime was absorbed into English thinking, not only about literature but about art in general, and gave an aesthetic quality to nature, as distinct from beauty. The very influential eighteenth-century writings of **Anthony Ashley-Cooper**, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, expressed an appreciation of the fearful and irregular forms of external nature. Writers **John Dennis** and **Joseph Addison** expressed a similar idea. All three had undertaken a Grand Tour, the educational tour to Italy for a gentleman, and made the journey across the Alps. There was no completed road at this time, carriages were separated into parts that could be carried by servants and people made the journey down by sledge, a journey containing superb natural scenery and occasionally a terrifying horror.

Shaftesbury writes of his sense of awe of the infinity of space where the Sublime was not an aesthetic quality in opposition to beauty, but a quality of grandeur and higher importance than beauty. In the early years of the eighteenth century Joseph Addison's notion of greatness was integral to the concept of sublimity. He used the term to describe the events of Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The doings of heroes, the struggles of noble beings – whether gods or men – were considered capable of raising the mind to a higher plane of contemplation and bringing it closer to the divine. The Bible was thought of as sublime literature closely followed in eighteenth-century opinion by Milton's modern epic *Paradise Lost*. **Edmund Burke** developed his ideas of sublimity in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1756. In the art world, painters

would carry achievements to whole new heights. They, together with writers, sought a new way of adding drama and theatricality to their presentations.

In garden design we see the dramatization of nature itself. **Lancelot 'Capability' Brown** (1716-83) was employed by landowners all over England to transform their parks into views that Claude might have painted. Landscape gardening became known as the 'sister art'.

This lecture includes a selection of artists whose work was influenced by the notion of the Sublime. At times they were influenced by the work of their predecessors, and certainly by numerous writers, as they expressed their own 'modern' ideas in art which had a resonance for their own time. For example, Claude builds on the fascination with Italy and the modern development of landscape as a genre for high status art rather than history paintings or portraiture. Turner loved Italy and was much influenced by the work of Claude, just as later the Americans took Turner's ideas to the developing United States.

Claude Lorrain 1600-82. French, he introduced a grand style, heroic scale and elevated subject matter within landscape, thus raising it to the genre of history painting. He was first trained as an engraver in Freiburg before settling in Rome and becoming a painter for the rest of his life. He was fascinated by the effects of light, atmosphere and vegetation on water as he depicted the luminous vistas of Campania in southern Italy which he described as 'poetic landscape'. **(Cover Image)**

Salvatore Rosa 1615-73. Italian, largely responsible for popularising the subject of wild, dark or threatening landscapes depicting nature at its roughest and most intimidating. Rosa was one of the boldest and most powerfully inventive artists and personalities of the Italian seventeenth century. He invented new types of painting, allegorical pictures embodying a haunting and melancholy poetry. He used dark strong colours and rich chiaroscuro creating a suggestive atmosphere. **(Figure 1)**

Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840. A German painter born in Greifswald in Pomerania close to the Baltic Sea, he is now famous for landscapes and seascapes charged with religious symbolism. He painted subjects from the Sublime to the Romantic, many depicting a religious spirit and composed in the manner of sermons or as a metaphor for life. For Friedrich, nature was a church, every part of it rich in transcendental significance. Many of his themes such as night, fallen trees, the vastness of nature and the insignificance of man became encompassed within the description Sublime. **(Figure 2)**

J.M.W. Turner 1775-1851. Born in London, he entered the Royal Academy School aged 15, was elected Associate in 1799 and Full Member in 1802. He travelled extensively in Europe. His mastery was apparent early, especially to fellow painters. Many of his works can be considered 'Sublime' but he was also a superb Romantic painter who was aware of the necessity of depiction of "the antique" to elevate the genre of his paintings. **(Figure 3)**

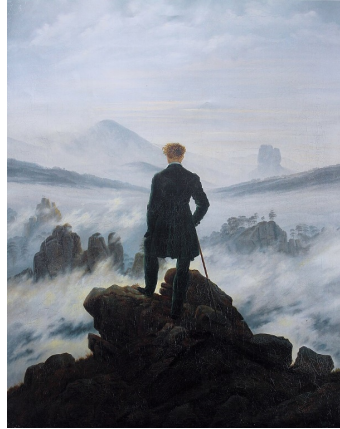
Thomas Cole, 1801-48. Born in England, he lived in USA from 1818. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy, then went to New York and became the founder of the Hudson River School of landscape artists. He travelled in Europe sketching, and back in his studio painted works expressing epic statements about nature and divinity in order to convey his sense of the sublimity of God as echoed in the world God had created.

Frederic Church 1826-1900. Born in America, he studied with Cole. In 1853 he travelled to South America inspired by the explorer Alexander von Humboldt and painted with great fidelity and a constant sense of awe and the Sublime. **(Figure 4)**

Albert Bierstadt 1830-1902. Born in Prussia, he emigrated to USA as a child. After 4 years of study in Europe from 1853, he travelled through the untamed West of America, the first artist to record this in 6 foot x 10 foot "specials" of 'untamed America' which commanded enormous prices.



Figure 1. Salvatore Rosa,
*Landscape with St Antony
Abbot and Paul the
Hermit.* 1660-65. National
Gallery of Scotland



**Figure 2. Caspar David
Friedrich,** *Wanderer above
the Sea of Fog.* 1818.
Kunsthalle, Hamburg



Figure 3. J. M. W. Turner, *Fishermen at Sea.* 1796.
Tate Britain, London



Figure 4. Frederic Church, *Aurora Borealis*, 1865.
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