

Expressing Passions Romanticism in Focus

In 1772, Sir Joshua Reynolds told the Royal Academy that perfect works of art 'cannot express the passions'. Harmony, uniformity and restraint were preferred and there was little room for emotional content. This stress on classical qualities characterised the 1700s, echoing the stability and confidence of Georgian society.

Artists of the early 1800s redressed the balance, placing human experience above artistic conventions and injecting greater personal vision into their work. This was largely in response to a more turbulent age of revolution, war and political reform.

Uncertainty and rebellion were echoed in art through subjects representing disturbance and in an emphasis on individuality and imagination. The term Romanticism defines these developments.

Although there was never an organised movement, there are distinctive hallmarks of Romantic art. These include a more direct response to nature and a new stress on colour as a means of expression. As artists became increasingly guided by their intuition, they grew more independent of patrons' demands: artistic freedom and experiment entered a new age.