

Getting Romantic

A review of the exhibition: *Varieties of Romantic Experience: Drawings from the Collection of Charles Ryskamp* at the Yale British Art Gallery, February 4, 2010 to April 25, 2010

By Geoffrey Detrani

Do you remember the Romantics? Not the 80's pop-rock band, or the love-struck Valentines celebrants, but the visual artists of the 18th and 19th centuries? If not, it might be because the "Romantic" movement in the visual arts has less common currency than its corollary in poetry (think Keats, Shelly and Byron.). Like the poets, the romantic artists were reactionaries of a sort, keen on challenging the prevailing political and cultural trends of their day. The Enlightenment principles that were determining governments and bolstering science represented, to the Romantics, a deadening materialism that left out the mysteries of the natural and spiritual world. Enter the artist of Romantic stripe- toiling in his garret, at odds with a numbed, materialistic society.

Another reason why we might not have such a clear idea of who the Romantic period artists were is because the term, as applied in the exhibition **Varieties of Romantic Experience: Drawings from the Collection of Charles Ryskamp** at the Yale British Art Museum and elsewhere, seems a bit of a catch all – a loose bag of historical retrospection that holds artifacts that stylistically might fit in many of the preceding or subsequent art historical periods.

Defined by the curators of the exhibition as the period between 1789 and 1848, the Romantic movement encompassed a wide range of aesthetic proclivities and inclinations. One of the key points of the show is to demonstrate the internationality of the Romantic Movement and the central role that British artists played. The exhibition features nearly 200 works by British, Dutch, French, German and Danish artists.

Drawn from the collection of Charles Ryskamp, the former Director of the Pierpoint Morgan Library, the show includes scores of drawings, prints, watercolors and oils. The works are arraigned in themed clusters, some of which are more lyrical, more romantic, than others. Categories like "Imagination," and "Romantic Ruins and the Church" abut categories like "Boats" and "The Human Figure". It's unsurprising that artists of any era will drawn from nature, the built environment and human and animal forms, but the desire on the part of many of the Romantic artists to posit the relevance of ruins (real and imagined) and to hail churches and religion as a counterpoint to the teeming rationality of the day is a particularly interesting idea that the exhibition explores.

But beyond the dynamics of scholarship (in obvious evidence), and presentation (impeccable), what do you see? There is a remarkable range to the work in the show. Some of the works evidence accomplished draftsmanship - superbly observed considerations of form, light and the relationship of objects in space. Pierre Joseph Redoue's marvelous watercolor "Plum Branches Intertwined" is an excellent example of this.

Some of the works reveal the artists' freer hand in rendering; Alphonse Mandevare's "Study of Pollarded Tree" of 1829 is a particularly remarkable expression of this. The gestural, colorist minimalism of Paul Huer's "Sunset" seems richly unrestrained and of a later era. And don't miss George Stubbs's gorgeous large book on horse anatomy.

Then there are those works that are less completely realized aesthetic statements than bits of visual ideas, notational devices for artists working out the tangles of inspiration and design. Look for the small, off-hand preparatory sketches by William Blake for his "America and Other Books" series. Drawings like these become particularly meaningful ciphers wherein we can glimpse the commonality between the artist then and ourselves now.

The show includes some big names; among them are J.M.W. Turner, Edgar Degas, Eugène Delacroix and Casper David Friedrich, as well as work by relative unknowns. In taking in all this art, one is struck by the sense that much of what is enfolded under the rubric "Romantic" did not necessarily substantively differ from what came before or after it – it was one era's iteration of timeless artistic reflexes and themes. Nevertheless, here is a carefully crafted collection, rooted in a historical era but evoking a timeless relevance.