

# Rebelling or Reconstruction: A New Understanding of the Classical by the Romantic Painters with Exploration Centered on Francisco Goya

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**Abstract.** The classic, originating in the intellectual development of Greek and Rome, has consistently been an essential subject of the Western culture, occupying an important role as well in Germanic law and Christian religion with its highlight on the spirit of reason, logic and humanity even in the Middles. With the discovery of Greece and Roman antiquity in Italian in the Renaissance, the classical mythologies and the masterpieces by Aristotle and Plato were once again emphasized, and interpreted from a different perspective. Hundreds of years later, the Enlightenment thinkers and neo-classical artists extracted the spirit of reason and morality from the classic. The neo-classical artists criticized the frivolous Rococo, choosing serious subjects aiming to elevate the morality of human, focusing on the integrity of the painting, strengthening sketch than color, and in this way restoring and revoking the Greco-Roman classical spirit. Yet the turmoil of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic war for decades doubts the limitation of the reason, revealing the madness of discipline and organization, displaying the mechanized and the alienated will of human-being. Delacroix and Goya, the representatives of romanticism artists, have been considered the rebels of neo-classic and the academy and the pioneers of modernity. Their works show the might of passion and emotion, depicting the fear, numbness, and indifference of human-being facing death, contrasting with the dignity and the firm attitude expressed by the neo-classical figures. This modernity roots in a certain historical context of the classic. Through pictorial analysis and the study of Delacroix's diaries and historical materials in contrast to the Baroque and Neo-classical artists to show Goya and Delacroix spontaneously invoke and reconstruct the spirit of ancient Greco-Roman art.

**Keywords:** French Revolution, Greece and Roman antiquity, the Renaissance, Goya.

## 1. Introduction

Romantic painters in the understanding of the concept of classical can be referred back to James's book Delacroix's Dante and Virgil as a Romantic Manifesto: Politics and Theory in the early 1820s, which indicates that the romantic painters were searching for a new way: "not simply a middle road, but a position beyond the conservative and liberal ideologies becoming associated with the competing systems of classicism and Romanticism" [1]. This is related to our subject, for the romantic painters' new understanding of the classical.

In western countries, there have been many pieces of research on Romanticism and its painters over the past decades, however in China, the research on this subject appeared to be a topic that has not gotten deep and thoroughgoing enough, therefore the attention on this subject is relatively less. There are some academic studies such as The Aesthetic Characteristics and Influence of French Romantic Paintings in the Nineteenth Century created by Peng Yanyan and Wang Yang said: 19th-century romantic painters only went further than their predecessors in content and subject matter, and the expression method still relied on classical. Apart from furthering the dynamic and changeable composition and the expressive power of colors of Baroque art, there is no newer exploration in the form [2]. You Diwen from the China Academy of Art takes Goya for example in The passion in the

paintings. Take Saturn Devouring his Son for example” what Nietzsche said in Zarathustra's book, this "lion" is like the spirit of Dionysus in Goya's painting, which makes his works reflect the same strong emotion, wanton style, and bizarre madness like people don't care about anything [3]. The spirit of Dionysus is not only mad, but also seeks the power of life, and makes it complete, even allows the individual in destruction to obtain the eternity and integrity of life." From the above article, it is clear that previous researchers compared the content of the painting and the passion in the painting with Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit, these are very interesting points. This article, on the other hand, attempts to analyze the rebellion, re-understanding, and reconstruction of the classics by romantic painters from a different perspective. It begins with introducing the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome and introduces Rubens' Saturn to compare Goya's work. The new understanding of human nature in romantic painters' point of view, like Goya's The Third of May 1808, the main figure's symbolism factor and the body gesture; the facial expression and body gesture depicted in Saturn Devouring his Son. From the brushstrokes, techniques, composition and content of the paintings, it is found that Goya abandoned the previous neoclassicism in the turbulent era at that time, thus found a new style, and left a lot of inspiration for the later generations such as Impressionism.

## 2. Beyond the power of reason of neo-classicism

Neo-classic artists considered classic as the reason, discipline, and organization. Rooting back to the development of the aesthetic in the Europe Continent like France and German, it is obvious that both the Art of Poetry by Boileau Despreaux and the idea of Gottsched originated from the rationalism of Rene Descarte. Under the reign of Louis XIV, Neo-classism emphasized the standardization of art and the obedience to the monarchy and authority. Descarte said “Je pense, donc je suis”, ignoring the existence and the importance of the sensibility and imagination. The representative of Neo-classism, Boileau Despreaux inherited his view, attempting to translate rationalism into an aesthetic manifesto. At the beginning of the Art of Poetry, he wrote his point of view about ration “Therefore, love reason, let all your articles always gain value and light only from reason”. The Neo-classic artists didn't refuse the existence of human nature, humanity. Instead, they stated human nature could be eternal as ration. They believe in sublimity, the influence of morals that lead to the elevation of the human spirit. They didn't deny the existence of emotions and passion but seemed to emphasize that all our emotions and nature should follow the stereotypes of ancient Greece and Rome. For example, Racine declared his depiction of characters' emotions imitated Euripides' in his Iphigenia at Aulis. These Neo-classic thinkers seem to ignore the autonomy of imagination, passion, talent and inspiration. We can further comprehend this from the debate of Gottsched, Bodmer and Breitinger.

However, the ancient Greek and Rome are not the world of rationalism, trusting the ratio of human-being as something eternal, unchangeable and belittling emotion. The idea of Herodotus and Thucydides sparkles, while thousands of years later, after the Germanizing and Christianization of Europe and the booming of monarchy strikes the traditional understanding of the classic. Even though the Neo-classic thinkers state they imitate and inherit Homer and Euripides, there's still a difference between the prototype and their works. Thucydides constructed the idea of physics, the human nature with struggle and irrationality. Historical rationality has nothing to do with natural rationality and is contrary to moral reason. The Peloponnesian War recorded the complex behavior of the Athenians and Spartans, revealing the eternal irrational aspect of human nature. Though all the factors that are mentioned above, this article aims to analyze two paintings by Francisco Goya.

The first painting is The Third of May 1808, which even though not directly depicted the mythology of Greek or Rome but commemorating the contemporary massacre in 19 century's peninsular War, might still involve the spirit of physis raised by the Greek philosophies, differing from the resemble theme depicted by Neo-classic Artists. We can make a comparison with the works of The Rape of the Sabine Women. Both the events of these two themes' works narrate turmoil with chaos and bleeding, with violence and panic, consisting of two groups of people from different nations. The rape of the Sabine Women has also been drawn by the Neo-classic artists Nicolas Poussin and

Jacques-Louis David. By contrasting these two works of these Neo-classism artists with the Third of May 1808, we could find the difference in the comprehension of the classic.

The ways the artists constructed the conflicts and tension are generated by different elements in the painting. The phenomenon on the Third of May 1808 by Goya is rather horrible than the Rape of the Sabine Women. They still have chaos, violence and panic in their works. In Poussin's first version's work, women stretch their slight arms, struggling from the Rome soldiers' constraints. All their male relatives: their fathers, husbands begging the Romans but still are wrenched away, separating from their daughters, wives, and sisters. In his final painting, the composition is divided into two parts deliberately with discipline. The male Sabine flees in disorder to the edge of the right sight, rugged and confounded. In both paintings, the Roman praetor, standing on the left elevated platform with his subordinate, stay silent and watched the turmoil with indifference and calm. This rational figure, as cool as a Greek statue, whose identity should be the creator of the massacre contrasts with the mess mass, provoking the conflict and tension in the whole picture. There is a less violent and brutal element in Jacques-Louis David's work, making the painting look more preaching. The women look quite upright, and bravely stand between swords and arrows, stopping the fight with their own fresh to protect their children and relatives. The dramatic conflict originates from the ration and sublimity of humans, from the restraint of emotion, the organization of hate, the moral and ration, and most importantly from their classical gestures.

But the third day of May is completely different, with its conflicts initiating from facial expressions, and body movements, emphasizing the element of uneasiness and horror. The disciplined, organized French troops stand in the right part of the painting, forming a diagonal line appearing to recede at the edge of the painting. Goya's oblique treatment of the scene hides the faces of the French soldiers, who are seen only in profile, against the light of the lantern at their feet. On the other side, the protagonists, the Spanish victims, stand in the light with their expressions towards the

viewers, trembling in the light. More carefully observing their face, especially to the white-shirt Spaniard will be slain by the salvo about to be fire, upholding his hands, it's obvious to find their expression is much more vivid and authentic. The white shirt Spaniard, frowning with his eye brows slouching in a rather exaggerated inclination. His eyes glared at the French soldiers, making his eyeballs look round. The mouth of the Spanish next to him forms a curve, conveying his nervousness and disbelief. These vivid, authentic expressions show us the man-nature facing death, with the mechanized will of ration contrasting with them in the violence.

The brushwork also elevates the sense of motion and power. The painting is sketchy. When we observe the white shirt of the Spanish protagonist, we can easily find the fast and transparent white brushstrokes, making the man still in motion, just raising his hands. The expression is vague and simplified, with the eyeballs, eyebrows, lips, the hair trembling, delivering the immediacy of the particular moment. The salvo is about to be fired, and the fear and the feeling are frozen in the silence, but the figures are immortalized by the dynamic narrative in the painting.

The way Goya depicts differs from the Neo-classic artists may not be something new Past research may connect the figure of the Spanish with the iconography of Jesus, but the spirit originating from ancient Greece may be ignored. Physis, which is translated in English as nature, is used by the Ionia Philosophers from Ionia, to refer to the natural environment [4]. Until BC 5 century, it is more related to human nature [4]. Thucydides uses this word to describe a wide range of human behavior, including the desire and evil side of humanity. Physis may contrast with logic, combining with passion and acts, may disintegrate the structure of the society. Luginbill connects physis with the word used by Thucydides, Gnome. It has a motivational and impulsive side and a perceptual, evaluable side, which could be the psychology of action [5]. Even in the funeral oration of Pericles, which is full of grand narratives because of the coming war, the emotional part of human-being is described by Thucydides. "Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and after one brief moment, while at the summit of their fortune, escaped, not from their fear, but glory". Fear and sacrifice could be compatible in the same person, just as the

Spaniard rebels on the Third of May 1808. They are feared, questioning their emotions, expressing their desire to stay alive as well as their confusion.

### 3. The portray of god: Saturn

The second painting is Saturn Devouring his son [6]. Before analyzing it, the mythology behind it is quite interesting: In ancient Greek mythology, Titan Cronus was the youngest son of Uranus, who could not stand Uranus' tyranny, then castrated his father, and started a new reign. Before back to the sky, his father cursed Cronus that one of his children will overthrow him in the future [7]. To prevent this, Cronus swallowed each one upon their birth. Saturn after being defeated was expelled to Latium, where he introduced agriculture, ushered into a Golden Age. During this time all the people were said to be equal, with no social distinctions made between classes.

Two famous painters depicted Saturn in their way. The first one is Paul Rubens, a Flemish Baroque artist, who is famous for his mythological paintings. In 1636, he received a commission that required him to paint a mythic plot about Saturn from Philip IV of Spain. The other one is Goya for his famous black paintings. After two years of work, in 1638 Rubens finished this painting. The thing holding in Saturn's right hand is a sickle, which shows his identity---god of the harvest. In daily life, most sickles are made into short handles. In this painting Rubens painted this handle very long, making some people think this detail makes it similar to a scythe, which is the weapon of the Grim Reaper, meaning that he is harvesting the life of his children. Suitable for this crucial action. This depiction was very close to Roman's Saturn. Between 501 and 498 B.C.E, a very famous temple to Saturn, the *Templum Saturni* was established at the heart of commerce for ancient Romans. A wooden made Saturn statue carried a scythe, probably a reference to Rubens. Other elements, like great muscular strength, foot standing on the clouds, and the three stars hanging in the background, show he is far away from human-being, a divine creature. The perfect body structure and dramatic movements reflect the superb Baroque painting skills that Rubens had. Behind all of these, was Rubens' expression about the family relationship in ancient Rome. The Power of the Father dominates every ancient Roman family, it gives a right named *Patria potestas* allows a father to do anything to his children, even abandon or kill them after their birth. The composition in this painting is delicate a kind of absolute control in ancient Roman families and it was very simple, in the middle was the main character Saturn, his head leaned forward, the upper part of his body bent slightly, holding his child on the left hand. He was surrounding this small child, like sucking his body with emotionless, pitilessness. There is no facial expression on his face while his child's face shows great pain. This is because of his identity as a Roman father, who has the biggest right to decide everything in the family, any form of violence was allowed. The suffocating dominant in Rubens' painting express his understanding of classic in a very perfect way.

While in Goya's work, more than a hundred years later, he began to create a series of mural paintings on the wall in his house, that was later called *Black Paintings* (1819-1823) [8]. Although they all depicted Saturn, the way these two painters understood these two versions of myth were different. Unlike Rubens, the "Saturn" image in this painting was more close to "Cronus", which is a Greece myth. Goya drew a giant monster that occupied most scale of this painting, suitable for the identity of Titan, which is known as their huge body. He had already chewed off the head of his child, and his black mouth opens around the elbow of the left arm, ready to bite it off. His joint is angular, his body is crouching, his hands are firmly embedded in his child's spine, and blood runs down his child's arm and shoulder. The evidence shows this "devouring" action was at the end, everything had happened, indirectly showing irreversible despair. Compare with the previous Rubens' painting Saturn was eating this child, representing direct cruelty.

Different from the divinity in Rubens' painting, more sense of humanity appeared in this painting. As to Goya, the face is a part of conveying emotions. Saturn's eyes are wide open, showing great hopelessness, seems can not escape from this fate. The previous Saturn was in the sky, this Saturn image was like in a dark cave, he stared at the viewer, and seems noticed that this violent action has

been found. Those fear, despair, and hopelessness convey to us in a moment as soon as we look at this painting. This Saturn does not have a strong body. Goya blurred most of his body to focus more on the main elements. For instance, his hands, face, movements, etc. After looking at these body parts, we will look at this “child”. But where is the child? The victims in this painting maybe are a teen or an adult. According to this myth, Saturn swallowed his children as soon as they were born, leaving them alive in his stomach. This is a different point that unlike both two same mythologies [9]. There are fewer skills in this painting. As the early Romanticism painter, he broke the roles set by Neoclassicism at his time, spending less time on the human body, to paint a religious myth painting. Give his answer to the classical painting theme. Those Roman elements did not include in this painting, by contrast, this painting was close to Greek mythology. Most gods in Greek mythology always have very exaggerated personalities, Cronus was a typical lecherous god. When Black Paintings were transferred to canvas in the mid-nineteenth century a detail that can support this characteristic was lost. Originally, Goya’s Saturn had an erect penis, this was a physiological symbol. More deeply, this may be a powerful symbol. In Greek mythology, a lot of strives were around power. The purpose why Saturn eats his child was his great desire for power, afraid he can not rule forever. In Goya’s understanding, after eating his child Saturn might be fear, despair, or regret. Those negative emotions can not stop him, he needs to, just eat his children one by one to ensure he could continue to be the ruler. All the complex emotions consist in this painting let it completely despairing, and irreversible.

#### 4. Baudelaire, Goya and Romanticism

The reason why Goya’s technique is so different is the time that he was in. Spanish painting waned after the Golden Age, new artists did not see a new way to rise again. In the early 18th century a new dynasty was rising, which means Spain began to be influenced by the French. The enlightened system that runs by the new ruler brought some new prosperity to Spain. In the late 18th century Charles IV, a disappointing monarch made Spain back in corrupt domination. Unfortunately, he became a court painter for this monarch. When other European countries had already started their bourgeois revolution, Spain was still struggling with its feudalism, Goya saw those big changes in his country, the king was taciturn, and people were superstitious. In 1793, an unknown illness made Goya deaf, this disease was a dark turning point in his life and art. At the same time the French Revolution (1789-95), shattered the peace of the 18th century and led directly to a series of catastrophes including the Peninsular War (from 1808 to 1814) when Napoleon’s armies overran Spain. Goya witnessed Napoleon brutally massacre those who were against his campaign and this affected him deeply. In February 1819 Goya bought the house named House of the Deaf Man and started painting those black paintings on his wall. A private place is a corner inside his mind, a quiet area for him to express himself. Nobody knows why he paints, but this painting is full of emotions.

“Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling”. Baudelaire said. In 1857, the tenth poem *L’Ennemi* (The Enemy) in Charles Baudelaire’s collection of poems *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flower of Evil) was published. Some poems conveyed the same emotion that Goya had been through. In the beginning, Baudelaire wrote:

My youth has been nothing but a tenebrous storm,  
Pieced now and then by rays of brilliant sunshine;  
Thunder and rain have wrought so much havoc  
That very few ripe fruits remain in my garden.

Combined with Goya’s life, his carefree childhood, and lifelong friendship work as a painter. These were all his brilliant sunshine, a kind of hope in life. In 1763 and 1766 Goya unsuccessfully participated in competitions held by Academy. An honorable mention in a competition held at the *Accademia di Parma* helped him obtain religious commissions in Saragossa, where he settled by June 1771. After more than ten years of stable life, the “sun” was obscured by dark “clouds”, and a storm

was coming to Europe. Those “thunder”, and "rain” started to torture him. In great chaos, the “ripe fruits” he only had was paintings. Goya was questioning, like the third part of this poem:

And who knows whether the new flowers I dream of  
Will find in this earth washed bare like the strand,  
The mythic aliment that would give them vigor?

Luckily, he was able to express himself through those Black Paintings. We have no clue what motivated Goya to paint Saturn Devouring his son at the end of life. “Le Temps mange la vie.” At the end of the poem, the enemy “Temps” emerges. William Aggeler translated it as: “Time eats away our lives”, another translator Roy Campbell understood it as: “Time swallows up our life”. These two phrases “eat away”, and "swallows up” were very close to the theme of devouring a child, we could infer that Saturn is a representation of time in Goya’s painting. Time is eternal, people’s endless strife is the strife with eternal time [10]. Saturn has endless life as well; he devours those new lives to prevent them snatch away his power. Maybe this dead teen or adult was like Goya or his country. Teens or adults are close to a kind of symbol of vitality, which means his “brilliant sunshine” or a prosperous society. Time made him deaf, older, let his country back to before, almost “die”. They can not fight against it with time, their enemy is indestructible, which makes Goya despair. Time eats every “body”, and uses its absolute power to control everything. In the end, time will suck blood to cut off the nourishment of life.

## 5. Conclusions

By revealing the comparison to the images of Pusan, David, and Rubens, presenting the similarity between the idea of Delacroix and Goya with the Greek family system, mythology, tragedy, Dionysus culture, and Thucydides’ works, it’s shown that the Romanticism artists Delacroix and Goya had a different explanation of the classic. Both Delacroix and Goya inherit the spirit and the techniques of the classic which stress the importance of physis raised by Thucydides and humanity. The Abduction of Rebecca by Delacroix depicts the natural horrifying expression of humans facing death and danger. Saturn Devouring his Son and Third of May 1808 indicates Goya’s painting is more close to the Greek Myth with more direct and cruel action of devouring rather than the Roman family cited by Rubens’ work, and it’s more close to the Thucydides’ view of physis with a bloodier and phantom style of expression on the theme of massacre and war rather than Pusan and David’s. It had been ignored previously the resemblance between the classical tradition and the Romanticism while we pay more attention to the modernity of Goya and Delacroix. In the future, there could have a further illustration of the romanticism artists’ classical spirit and techniques. By investigating the shifting of classical intellect and ideas through different periods in Europe, a study of the traditional aspects of Romanticism artists is within reach.

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