

Essay writing

in Art History and Theory

Answering the question

What is Romantic about the work of Friedrich, Turner, Runger, Gericault, Constable, or Blake? Choose one or two artists and analyse two artworks in relation to the themes, ideals and strategies of Romanticism.

Research and identify the themes, ideals and strategies (e.g. formal qualities and formats) of Romanticism in.

The initial sentence suggests the diversity of approaches embodied by Romanticism and the difficulties of defining it. It indicates that this should form part of your response.

Choose two artwork case studies that will form the body of your essay, using visual analysis and historical context to make key points that will form your argument in relation to the question

In your case studies, it's a good idea to focus on a single aspect of Romanticism in art (e.g. a shared theme) so that you can better compare and contrast their different formal aspects (their strategies).

Developing an argument

- What do you want to say?
- Does your choice of artworks allow you to say it?
- How will you use visual analysis to support your argument?
- Does your research support your point of view?

Doing research

- Start broad – general internet sources are fine at this point, as are introductions or overviews of the period or topic. Make a shortlist of potential artwork case studies and ideas as you read.
- Begin to narrow your focus by reading JSTOR articles and chapters in edited books that are relevant to your case studies. Take careful note of the author and publishing details of text you are reading and the page numbers you take notes from
- Take notes as you read, but try to paraphrase rather than copying word for word – putting ideas in your own words helps you to understand them and will be useful in the writing stage.
- Use scholarly sources – books or articles that have an author and references (footnotes and/or bibliography). These are contributions to scholarship rather than summaries and will give you more to work with in terms of ideas and interpretation.

Structuring your argument – 5 part (shared context)

1. introduction (about 100-150 words)

Identify the problem in the question, summarise your thesis (what you want to 'say'), identify artworks and justify your choice (how they help you to understand the problem)

2. Context (about 150-200 words)

The relevant background to the problem: what the reader needs to know in order to understand your argument. Make this VERY SPECIFIC to the topic of your essay.

3. Artwork 1 (about 500 words)

Analysis of subject, form and meaning in relation to the historical context of the work. Focus on developing at least 3 key points that help you to make your argument.

4. Artwork 2 (about 500 words)

Analysis of subject, form and meaning in relation to the historical context of the work. Focus on developing at least 3 key points that help you to make your argument, linking them with the points you made in relation to artwork 1.

5. Comparative analysis (about 200 words)

Develop a focused comparison or contrast of the artworks in relation to your thesis. What does the relationship between these artworks tell us about your topic? How does it reinforce your main points? Can you observe a shift in the handling of subject matter, or a new set of concerns that relate to changes in historical context or ideas about art?

Structuring your argument – 4 part (different contexts)

1. Introduction (about 100-150 words)

Identify the problem in the question, summarise your thesis (what you want to 'say'), identify artworks and justify your choice (how they help you to understand the problem)

2. Artwork 1 (about 600 words)

Analysis of subject, form and meaning in relation to the historical context of the work. Focus on developing at least 3 key points that help you to make your argument.

3. Artwork 2 (about 600 words)

Analysis of subject, form and meaning in relation to the historical context of the work. Focus on developing at least 3 key points that help you to make your argument, linking them with the points you made in relation to artwork 1.

4. Comparative analysis (about 200 words)

Develop a focused comparison or contrast of the artworks in relation to your thesis. What does the relationship between these artworks tell us about your topic? How does it reinforce your main points? Can you observe a shift in the handling of subject matter, or a new set of concerns that relate to changes in historical context or ideas about art?

Writing

- Make a plan before you start to write that will help you structure your argument
- Use the plan as a framework for your notes, dropping them in under the headings. This will help you decide where your points will go so that your argument is clear and detailed. It may also show up gaps in your research and argumentation
- Start writing when you know what you want to say – use your notes to develop the content of your paragraphs
- Revise and restructure often to make your points clear and relevant to your argument
- A few days in between writing sessions helps you to see the progress you're making and the changes that could be made
- Aim for clarity over complexity. As a general rule, *show* rather than *tell* by persuading your reader through visual and historical evidence

Quotations

- Don't quote from secondary sources, paraphrase instead (put the ideas into your own words, and then cite the text in a footnote)
- Only quote from primary or secondary sources if you are going to analyse their meaning – never substitute someone else's words for your own
- We want to see that you have read and synthesised art history scholarship. You can demonstrate this through discussion rather than quotation

Where to use footnotes

- At the end of a sentence
- Use one footnote per sentence (don't interrupt the flow of your argument by including multiple notes in a sentence)
- If you need to clarify how you are using the source, do so in the footnote text (e.g. 'for the political interpretation of waves in late Edo woodblock prints, see Christine Guth...')

When to use footnotes

- When you are quoting (although avoid quoting secondary sources)
- When you are paraphrasing, to indicate the source of the idea or information (this is a positive thing and demonstrates your research)
- After making statements or offering interpretations that rely on someone else's original research. E.g. “Bada Shanren used fish as symbols of the leftover subjects of the Ming”. This is not common knowledge; someone had to work hard to discover this. However, “Bada Shanren’s painting depicts fish in a pond, which were common motifs in his work”, doesn’t need a footnote
- Interpretations must be footnoted, whether these come directly from an author “Bada Shanren’s painting can be linked to the political context of the new Dynasty...”, or speaking for the artist through an author, for instance “Bada Shanren believed that...”
- You can also use footnotes to make an aside, something that does not relate to your main argument but that demonstrates your research.

Bibliography

- All the sources cited in your footnotes should be included in a bibliography
- This is an alphabetical list of sources ordered by author surname that comes at the end of your essay
- You can include general sources that you have not directly cited only if they are relevant to your topic (and you read them).

Image list

- If you want to include reproductions of the artworks discussed in your essay, put them in a separate image list between the end of the essay and the bibliography
- Image captions should include the following information:
- Artist name, *title of work* (in italics), year, medium (e.g. oil on canvas), dimensions (in cm), and the location of the work (e.g. Royal Collection Trust, London)

RETHINKING VISION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTINGS OF THE BLIND

GEORGINA COLE

The spectre of blindness looms large in the visual art of the early modern period. With the prevalence of disease, accident, and congenital disorders, blindness was a common condition in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, but one also charged with symbolic meaning.¹ In the philosophical and religious writing of the period, "to see" is a pervasive metaphor for understanding and clarity of judgement, and to be blind, a metaphor for wilful ignorance, stupidity, or misfortune.² While eighteenth-century French literature and philosophy remains predominantly vision-centric, for a brief period beginning in the 1750s blindness is radically reconceived within the radius of Enlightenment thinking, as is the relationship between the five senses. Informed by the sensationalist philosophy of John Locke and the popular success of cataract operations, philosophical and social attitudes to the blind and the nature of blindness at mid-century are significantly diversified. From an external marker of transgression, ignorance, or misfortune, blindness was increasingly understood as a philosophically intriguing and medically curable condition linked to sensation, epistemology, and morality.

Blindness excited the curiosity of many Enlightenment thinkers and medical practitioners, and engaged the imaginations of a number of prominent eighteenth-century artists. Shifting perceptions of blindness and its ramifications for the visual art of painting can be detected in two mid-century paintings by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Greuze. Chardin's *The Blind Man* (Fig. 5), a tiny canvas exhibited at the Salon of 1753, depicts a solitary blind figure standing with his dog, stick and cup by a dark passageway. Greuze's *The Blind Man Deceived* (Fig. 6),

exhibited at the following Salon in 1755, is a multi-figure scene that puts blindness in the context of a moral narrative. Both paintings represent blindness as a condition that reveals insights into the nature of perception, reception and the pitfalls of an over-reliance on vision.



Fig. 5. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Blind Beggar*, c.1753, oil on canvas, 29.8 x 23 cm Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Photo: Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College

While the cultural and social meanings of blindness in the eighteenth century have received substantial scholarly attention, these two paintings have not yet been fully examined in relation to the subject.³ Indeed, little scholarship has addressed the representation of the blind in art. Notable exceptions are Moshe Barasch's *Blindness: the history of a mental image in western thought*, of 2001, a study of general trends in the depiction of vision impairment, and Jacques Derrida's catalogue essay for the exhibition *Memoirs of the blind: the self-portrait and other ruins*, at the Musée du Louvre in 1993.⁴ While Barasch's book identified the key tropes asso-

¹ See Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society: From the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1-12.

² On the vision-centric nature of early modern thinking see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 21-82.

³ Three excellent recent studies are Weygand, *The Blind in French Society*, William Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Blind in France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), and Kate Tunstall, *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁴ Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: the History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-*

ciated with blindness, its scope was limited to the period from classical antiquity to the seventeenth century, excluding the major attitudinal shifts toward blindness that effect eighteenth-century art and thought. Derrida's work, on the other hand, dealt specifically with the "blindness" of the self-portrait—the moment of turning away from the self in order to make marks on paper. Although Derrida touched upon Greuze's and Chardin's paintings in the context of his larger argument, the philosophical nature of the enquiry necessarily omitted any study of their relationship to changing social, cultural, and philosophical ideas about sensation and sensory impairment.

The present work seeks to fill the gap in current scholarship, and in so doing, examine key issues of perception, sensation, and representation in early modern art. In this sense, it draws chiefly upon Jennifer Milam's examination of feigned blindness in eighteenth-century paintings of play.⁵ Milam's analysis of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's representations of the popular aristocratic pastime "blindman's buff" demonstrates the ways in which blindness, in this case momentary and deliberate, engages with wider eighteenth-century debates about love and courtship. In addition, her work explores the ways in which blindness can elicit an interactive, embodied response from the viewer that activates the senses and the imagination. This article incorporates Milam's methodologies, particularly her examination of the playful treatment of the senses and the shaping of the viewer's response, into the study of representations of real blind people in eighteenth-century art. The Enlightenment rethinking of cognition and sensory perception temporarily democratises the senses, effecting a lateral rather than hierarchical organisation of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. As a multi-sensory art form that exercises both vision and touch, painting is uniquely positioned to renegotiate the relationships between the senses, knowledge, and social identity. This essay explores the connections between Chardin's and Greuze's depictions of blindness and contemporary philosophical debates about sensation, sensory deprivation, and the acquisition of knowledge. It proposes that for Chardin and Greuze blindness is a subject and a methodology for painting that undermines the power and authority of sight and promotes touch and hearing as valuable alternative epistemologies.

Portrait and Other Ruins, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993). See also Nicolas Mirzoeff, *Body-scape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (London: Routledge, 1995), 35–49.

⁵ Jennifer Milam, *Fragonard's Playful Paintings: Visual Games in Rococo Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 19–51.

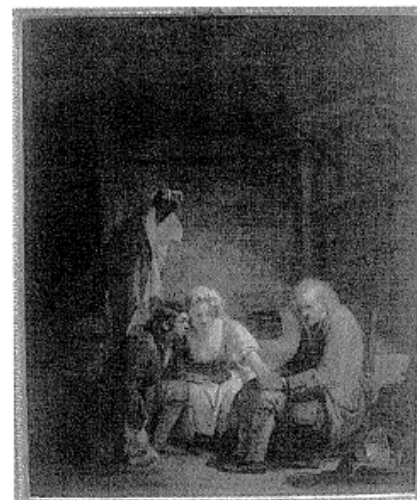


Fig. 6. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Blind Man Deceived*, 1755, oil on canvas © The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Ekaterina Abramova

Blindness, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, has traditionally symbolised supernatural insight, divine punishment, and heavenly reward.⁶ In biblical episodes such as the healing of Tobit, the conversion of St Paul, and the healing of the blind of Jericho, it announces the interpenetration of the divine and earthly realms, and offers evidence of spiritual power acting upon the mortal world. In seventeenth-century French art, the blind are typically depicted either as biblical figures healed as a reward for faith, or as colourful characters in the "Cries of Paris" tradition. In Nicolas Poussin's *Christ Healing the Blind* of 1650 (Musée du Louvre), a pair of blind figures, linked by touch, kneels to receive Christ's healing blessing. The blue-robed figure in contact with Christ is bathed in the light that seems to emanate from Jesus, while the figure behind him is less brightly lit, suggesting the connection between light, sight, and salvation. This painting, celebrated by the professors of the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture for its expression, composition, and treatment of light, informed other representations of the subject, such as Antoine Coypel's *Christ's Healing of the Blind at Jericho* (1684) and Francois Lemoyne's *La Guérison de*

⁶ Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Blind*, 5–9. See also Michael E. Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness: Attitudes Toward Blindness and Blind People* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

l'Aveugle-né, which similarly depict the blind as generalised recipients of mercy and the healing of the blind as a miracle that served to "enlighten" the Jews.⁷

Particularised representations of the blind in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century graphic art, however, emphasise the poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation of the blind. For example, Jacques Callot's drawings of blind beggars in the *Les Gueux* series of 1622-25 (Fig. 7) draw attention to their ragged clothing, wrinkled faces, and ungainly postures. The etching in the British Museum shows a blind figure in rags clutching the hand of his companion, who holds out a hat to passers-by, his face creased with uncertainty.⁸ Likewise, George de la Tour's paintings of a blind hurdy-gurdy player (c. 1624-50, Musée des beaux-Arts, Nantes, Fig. 8; 1610-1630, Museo del Prado) focus on the awkwardness and distorted features of the street musician, his brow wrinkled and mouth stretched open in song.⁹ The strange disposition of limbs and discomposure of the face here suggest the musician's inward focus and lack of external awareness. La Tour depicts blindness with confronting, repellent realism. His fine, almost invisible brushstrokes clarify every awkward detail of the hurdy-gurdy player's appearance, making it almost impossible to respond sympathetically to the boldly constructed and highly finished figure. In these seventeenth-century examples, the blind are primarily shown to be generalised recipients of Christian mercy, or contemporary roguish unfortunates scraping a living in the streets and cabarets. These paintings and prints are not so much about the nature of blindness in and of itself, but use it either to demonstrate Christ's miraculous healing powers, or the curiosity and disability of marginalised and poverty-stricken urban dwellers.

By contrast, mid-eighteenth-century paintings of the blind tend to explore the personal experience of blindness and its impact on cognition within a larger system of social relationships. Informed by changing attitudes to the senses and the growing humanitarian culture of *sensibilité*, they suggest a new set of social and philosophical attitudes to the blind.¹⁰

⁷ André Félibien, *Seven Conferences Held in the King of France's Cabinet of Paintings*, anon. trans. (London: T. Cooper, 1740), 129-164.

⁸ On their relationship to Rembrandt's depictions of blind beggars, see Julius Held, "A Rembrandt 'theme'", *Artibus et Historiae* 5, no. 10 (1984): 22-25.

⁹ Seventeenth-century representations of hurdy-gurdy players are discussed in Hellerstedt, "A Traditional Motif in Rembrandt's Etchings: the Hurdy-Gurdy Player", *Oud Holland* 95 (1981): 16-30.

¹⁰ On *sensibilité*, see Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

In Enlightenment writing of the mid-eighteenth-century, particularly that of Denis Diderot and the Encyclopédistes, blindness is desacralized, stripped of its spiritual relationship to sin, conversion and reward, and subjected to the empirical methodologies of science and philosophy. As cultural historians such as William Paulson and Zina Weygand have argued, blindness becomes a topic of philosophical investigation and medical experiment in the Enlightenment. For the scientists, thinkers and artists of this period, it is increasingly considered a physical condition with medical causes and epistemological effects.¹¹

The two most powerful forces affecting this change were the spread of Lockean sensationalism from the 1690s onward and William Cheselden's successful cataract operations in the late 1720s. Locke's philosophy, which transformed epistemology by arguing for the crucial role of the senses in generating human understanding, brought blindness into the spotlight by considering its effect on the acquisition of knowledge and the recognition of objects. In 1694, Locke introduced a discussion of blindness into the second edition of *An Essay on Human Understanding* by publishing his answer to a question posed to him by the Dublin lawyer William Molyneux.¹² Molyneux had asked the philosopher whether a blind man, having his sight restored, would be able to differentiate a cube from a sphere without touching them. Locke answered in the negative, arguing that because the blind man had no innate knowledge of which was the cube and which the sphere, and because he had no prior experience of the sense of sight, he would not be able to distinguish them.¹³ Through Molyneux's question, blindness allowed Locke to demonstrate the absence of innate ideas and the vital interdependence of the senses in generating knowledge. This suggested that it was the interplay between all perceptive faculties that produced knowledge and that the senses could be laterally organised, rather than hierarchically.

Cheselden's operations, on the other hand, showed that blindness was, in many cases, a reversible medical condition that could be cured by mod-

¹¹ Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Blind*, 5; Weygand, *The Blind in French Society*, 7.

¹² There is extensive scholarship on Molyneux's question and its relation to Lockean sensationalism; see Michael J. Morgan, *Molyneux's Question: Vision, Touch, and the Philosophy of Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and Marjolein Degenaar, *Molyneux's Problem: Three Centuries of Discussion on the Perception of Forms*, trans. Michael J. Collins (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996).

¹³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding; the second edition, with large additions* (London: Printed for Awnsham and John Churchill, 1694), Book II, chapter IX.