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## British Romanticism is the Theme of National Gallery of Art Prints and Drawings Exhibition on View November 19, 2006—March 18, 2007



Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, British, 1828 - 1882

*Desdemona's Death-Song*, 1875/1880,

black chalk over traces of red chalk on two joined sheets of blue-green paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Century Fund and Paul Mellon Fund

Washington, DC—A new exhibition drawn from the Gallery's collection of prints and drawings, combined with major loans from private collections, will survey the varied art of British romanticism. **The Artist's Vision: Romantic Traditions in Britain**, on view

in the West Building's prints and drawings galleries from November 19 through March 18, 2007, features approximately 70 works from the late 18th century through the early 20th century. The exhibition presents artworks by Samuel Palmer, J.M.W. Turner, William Blake, and more.

Created against a backdrop of political and social upheaval, British romantic art exemplified a revival of interest in medieval art and subject matter, a rebellion against conventional ideas and academic styles, and an assertion of the importance of emotion over intellect.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's drawing of *Desdemona's Death Song* (c. 1879), the most complete version of a project that haunted the artist for years and a recent acquisition for the Gallery, will be exhibited here for the first time. This drawing will hang beside an earlier version of the same subject, providing visitors with a rare opportunity to compare the two works and to trace the evolution of Rossetti's ideas. The moment depicted is one from the end of Shakespeare's *Othello*: Desdemona singing her "willow song" of unrequited love moments before Othello murders her in a fit of jealous rage.

*Desdemona's Death Song* is a highlight of Shakespeare in Washington, a citywide festival running from January through June 2007 featuring numerous events at venues across the metropolitan area.

## **Exhibition Support**

**The Artist's Vision: Romantic Traditions in Britain**, organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, is supported by a generous grant from the Thaw Charitable Trust.

"The Gallery's collection of British prints and drawings from the late 18th to the 20th century has had outstanding growth in recent decades, enabling us to present such an exhibition as this," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art. "We're grateful that the Thaw Charitable Trust supports our efforts."

## **The Exhibition**

The romantic artist's passionate identification with nature and his belief in its ability to

inspire deep emotion led to new developments in art and literature. The first section of this exhibition traces the evolution of the romantic landscape from 18th-century ideas about the sublime and picturesque. Highlights include two watercolors by Paul Sandby, John Constable's drawing *A Great Oak Tree* (c. 1801), and a panoramic view of a mountainous landscape by Alexander Cozens.

The pastoral landscapes of Samuel Palmer and the Ancients, an artistic brotherhood united in their admiration for poet and painter William Blake, form an interesting case study of romantic ideas about nature. The exhibition includes Palmer's visionary watercolor *Harvesters* (1830), as well as a rare, hand-colored impression of his etching *The Sleeping Shepherd* (1857).

With the rediscovery of Palmer in the 1920s, British printmakers F. L. Griggs, Graham Sutherland and others turned to the Ancients for inspiration, drawing romantic traditions into the 20th century with their own landscape etchings.

Many of the greatest British landscapes of the 19th century are watercolors, and a section of the exhibition spotlights the Gallery's rich collection of works in this medium. Emerging techniques in watercolor complemented romantic views of nature and were well suited to capture transient effects of weather and light.

Thomas Girtin, a pioneer in watercolor, is represented by *Conway Castle, North Wales* (c. 1800). Among the works by J.M.W. Turner is *Ingleborough from the Terrace of Hornby Castle* (c. 1818), generously lent by a private collector, which demonstrates the subtlety complexity of the artist's watercolor techniques. Samuel Palmer's *A Cascade in Shadow* (c. 1836), also from a private collector, is a stunning naturalistic view in departure from earlier works, and John Martin's *View on the River Wye, Looking toward Chepstow* (1844) provides a splendid example of an exhibition watercolor, a large-format work intended to rival oil painting.

The romantic fascination with extremes of human behavior found artistic expression in the works of Henry Fuseli and his circle. Described as "shockingly mad" by contemporaries, Fuseli's treatment of supernatural and horrific themes influenced artists ranging from John Hamilton Mortimer to George Cruikshank. Perhaps the most

important artist in this group is William Blake, represented by a number of works, including one of his widest known and most admired apocalyptic watercolors, *The Great Red Dragon and the Beast from the Sea* (c. 1805).

Romanticism in its purest form peaked before the middle of the 19th century, but many of its major trends lingered for decades in the work of Pre-Raphaelite artists, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. Rossetti was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of British artists who rejected early 19th-century academic conventions and turned instead to early Italian painting and to nature for inspiration.

### **Exhibition Curator and Programs**

Stacey Sell, assistant curator of old master drawings, National Gallery of Art, organized the exhibition.

A November 26 concert will feature the National Gallery Vocal Arts Ensemble performing music by Edward Elgar and other British composers. The concert will be held in the West Garden Court at 6:30 p.m.; first-come, first-seated a half hour before the concert starts. Entry is at Sixth Street until 6:30 p.m. For more information, call (202) 842-6941 or visit [www.nga.gov/programs/music/index.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/programs/music/index.shtm) (<http://www.nga.gov/programs/music/index.shtm>).

A special afternoon tea menu will be available in the West Building's Garden Café, Sundays from 4 to 6 p.m., in conjunction with the free evening concerts in the West Garden Court. Reminiscent of the traditional English tea party, the menu will offer a variety of teas, scones, Devonshire cream, preserves, assorted tea sandwiches, pastries and cheeses. To make reservations for eight or more, call (202) 216-2884.

Gallery talks will take place at noon on Dec. 13, 17 and 21, and on Dec. 19 at 1 p.m. Meet in the West Building Rotunda.

Information about the exhibition and links to related activities can be found on the Gallery's Web site at [www.nga.gov/exhibitions/britaininfo.htm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/britaininfo.htm) (<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/britaininfo.shtm>). For more information about

Shakespeare in Washington, visit [www.kennedy-center.org/Shakespeare](http://www.kennedy-center.org/Shakespeare).

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit [www.nga.gov/renovation](http://www.nga.gov/renovation) (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) and on Twitter at [twitter.com/ngadc](http://twitter.com/ngadc).

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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