

Gothic: Horror and Fantasy in British Art, from Fuseli to Frankenstein

It has long been recognised that from the 1770s British artists began to deal with images of extreme violence and horror, perversion and the supernatural. Given licence by the aesthetics of the Sublime and a new appreciation of the Gothic, Henry Fuseli, William Blake and a host of others explored an unprecedented range of imaginative themes and sought innovative forms of expression. These developments have tended to be seen as simply aberrant, anticipating the irrationalism of 'Romanticism', relating in a rather undefined way to the Gothic literature of Horace Walpole and 'Monk' Lewis or, most often, considered in isolation as expressions of individual, eccentric 'genius'.

In recent years, literary and cultural historians have re-appraised Gothic literature in its political, social and psychological contexts. These developments have been little acknowledged in the literature on art but potentially offer a means of considering an important phenomenon in British visual culture afresh. This exhibition would be the first to consider seriously the themes of Gothic horror and fantasy in the visual arts, interpreting these phenomena in relation to major political and historical traumas (the imperial crisis of the 1780s and the French Revolution), a radical reworking of the relationship between high and low culture (Gothic novels were the first trash literature) and the transformation of ideas of the self in science and social theory. Each of these developments was fundamental to the emergence of modernity: images of Gothic horror in British art were, in effect, images of the violent birth of the modern self.

The proposal is for an exhibition that would consider these themes in British art from the 1770s to the 1830s. The works of Henry Fuseli and William Blake would be central throughout, although the exhibition would include a range of artists working in different media and in different genres, including Thomas Rowlandson, James Gillray, John Hamilton Mortimer, James Barry, George Romney, Richard and Maria Cosway, and Benjamin West. The exhibition would encompass paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture and illustrated books. Caricature would have to feature extensively, both for its commentary on Gothic themes, and for the vitally creative dialogue between satirical and 'high' art that distinguishes this period. Potentially, examples of the works of the Old Masters who provided models for these artists - notably Salvator Rosa and the Italian Mannerists - would also find a place in the exhibition, and

an international perspective could be introduced through the work of European artists who are known to have been influenced by developments in British art, such as Goya and the German Nazarenes.

The area has been dealt with obliquely through monographic exhibitions, and in a more direct if also more limited form in focussed shows, notably *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* (YCBA 1979) and *The Shadow of the Guillotine* (BM 1989). The significance of Sublime themes in landscape art has been attended to in a number of contexts. This exhibition would be the first to take an overview of horror and fantasy in figurative art, and thoroughly to historicise these developments. It will establish novel perspectives on Blake and Fuseli, set out the historical precedents for the popular culture of today, and reveal the range and richness of fantasy art during this period of turbulent change in British culture.

Possible themes

The Gothic Nightmare

Focussing on Fuseli's famous *The Nightmare* (exh.1782) and its reception, this section could introduce the Gothic as a cultural category, the issues of high and low culture it raises, and the emergence of horror themes in visual art in 1770s and 1780s. Fuseli's painting could be contextualised in relation to the fantasy art that he and his contemporaries were presenting to the public in the early 1780s, works that were noted for their novelty and their challenge to the norms of academic art practice. Addressing a wide audience through expressly populist themes, these sensationalising works mark the beginning of fantasy art as a vital cultural form.

Heroes in Distress

A distinctive feature of the high art of this period is the appearance of heroes exposed to extreme danger, pain and torture, figures that register a crisis in confidence regarding traditional notions of masculine virtue. This is apparent in the extraordinary Diploma Works presented to the Royal Academy by Henry Fuseli, John Francis Rigaud and Thomas Banks, works which conform to academic principles about how to depict the body while also breaking those rules to establish a Sublime vision of the hero. These would be accompanied by images of torture and imprisonment by William Blake, the Cosways, the so-called 'Master of the

Giants' and other artists whose images explored physical and psychological extremes.

Fairies and Fantasy

The fantastic and Gothic elements of Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser emerged as major sources for British art in this period, contributing to the creation of a specifically national iconography, while lending authority to art that was simultaneously high-minded, fantastical and determinedly populist. For patriotic commentators, British artists were distinguished for their exploration of such richly imaginative themes and their innovative approach to the depiction of narrative, which seemed suffused with a creative freedom denied to rule-bound European artists, who operated within authoritarian rather than commercial settings. The literary fantasies of Fuseli would be a central component here, and the depiction of fairies and fantasy traced through to Theodore Von Holst in the 1820s and 1830s, whose art provides a link to the later and more familiar phenomenon of Victorian fairy art.

Revelation and Apocalypse

The 1790s and 1800s saw the emergence of prophetic and apocalyptic imagery as major themes in imaginative art, with a number of artists taking up subjects taken from the Book of Revelation. William Blake is, of course, the acknowledged master of such imagery, but prophetic themes have an important place in the art of James Gillray, and, perhaps more surprisingly, that of Benjamin West, with his *Death on a Pale Horse* and Revelation designs for the Royal Chapel at Windsor. Idiosyncratic as these images may appear considered in isolation, they emerged from a more widespread set of concerns – millenarianism, resurgent Evangelicalism and a sense of political crisis during the Revolutionary era.

The Revolution as Horror Show

The French Revolution prompted artists and writers to explore the limits of their art in order to find a means of expressing the violence and novelty of these events. Drawing on the imaginative art of the previous decades – as Burke drew on the conventions of Gothic literature in his depiction of the mob's abuse of Marie-Antoinette – British caricaturists and artists exceeded themselves in evoking the Revolution as a scene of grotesque horror. Most prominent among them was James Gillray, although there are works by James Northcote, Johann Zoffany and George Romney to be considered in this context. Conversely, a number of artists, including

James Barry and Henry Fuseli, explored a heroic imagery of political revolution, casting it as an act of Miltonic rebelliousness.

The Scientific Sublime

If the period from 1770 to 1830 can be distinguished for its Gothic fantasies of the body, it was also the era that modern, 'scientific' approaches gained dominance. Yet the worlds of Gothic and scientific anatomy are linked, through popular perceptions of anatomical criminality (with Burke and Hare) and a shared obsession with abnormality, culminating in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This section would explore these themes through the inclusion of anatomically-related works from Van Rymsdyck's illustrations to *The Graved Uterus*, which cast female anatomy as a threatening, Salvatorian landscape, though to artists' anatomical experiments and the perversions and grotesqueries depicted in caricature. That *Frankenstein's* first illustrator was Theodore Von Holst, a pasticher of Fuseli, tellingly draws together the new world of scientific revelation and the old world of Gothic supernaturalism.

Possible collaborators/contributors

The themes of Gothic horror and fantasy have been the subject of both popular writing and specialist scholarly interest. As a broad category, 'Gothic' has attracted attention from some prominent cultural commentators, notably Christopher Frayling (with his *Nightmare: The Birth of Horror* 1996) and Marina Warner (whose Clarendon Lecture for 2002 is on the subject of 'Imperial Gothic'). Within literary studies the Gothic has emerged as a major field of inquiry in recent years. Notable contributions include E.J. Clery's *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (1995) and James Watt's *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (1999). Thus there are a range of possibilities for enriching the approach of the exhibition, with an eye towards both scholarly audiences and the wider public.

MM / May 2002