

The Birth of German Art: Italia and Germania

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The German Romantic period is a critical moment in European art history; a moment recognized as the first modern movement in terms of artist originality and ingenuity regarding past and future.¹ Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869) played a pivotal role in the development of Romantic philosophy and the establishment of a unique German style. This paper will analyze the substantial stylistic changes brought about by Overbeck (evident in *Italia und Germania* [Figure 5]) which stand not alone, but are also a product of numerous socioeconomic factors.

The approach of this paper is the synthesis of ideologies from Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* (1915) and Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (1983.) Wölfflin's idea that "[An art movement] is neither a rise nor decline from the classic, but a totally different art,"² is reoccurring idea present in the discussion of the value of Romantic art. While I will explore the stylistic traits and progression that made the Romantic era unique, I will also examine social influences. Wölfflin concedes that in recognition of a special type beauty "do we not come back to the beginning, where style was conceived as the direct expression of temperament, be it temperament of a time, of a people, or of an individual?"³ Janet Wolff distinguishes the elements of technology, social institutions, and economic factors as critical to

¹ Frank Benjamin Mitchell, *German Romantic Painting Redefined* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001), 1.

² Wölfflin, "Principles of Art History," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115.

³ Wölfflin, "Principles of Art History," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115.

the understanding of art.⁴ In the examination of Johann Friedrich Overbeck and his painting *Italia und Germania* I will observe the interplay and value of both these stylistic and social production approaches.

In order to reconcile the art of the Romantic period with its *Zeitgeist*, it is necessary to analyze the social factors at work in its production. Firstly, it is important to note the many cross-cultural influences which made German Romantic art so diverse. Germany did not become a unified nation until 1861. This left the area of German culture, Germania, subject to Prussian, Austrian and French occupation. Amazingly the regions of Germania were bound together simply by common language and literature. Romantic literature and art found themselves dependent on one another, for the art was an expression of the philosophical ideas at work in literature and literature needed art to fully express the ideas of their philosophy. Goethe, well-known German Romantic author, characterized the early German Romantic style as “Neo-german-religious-patriotic art.”⁵ These words in his description explain what the reactionary qualities of the early German Romantic were responding to.

The provocation of a religious revivalism started with Europe’s witness of the violence of the French Revolution of 1789. Scaring many followers of the Enlightenment, the revolution threatened the beliefs in the ingenuity of man and that his reason could guide humanity. Literature across Europe was influenced by this. In *Christianity or Europe*, German poet Novalis reflected upon the Middle Ages as a time when society harmoniously functioned based not on reason, but faith. Novalis viewed the French Revolution simply as a consequence of the Reformation.⁶ In literature there was much philosophical debate over the value of past cultures,

⁴ Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press 1984), 32.

⁵ Mitchell Benjamin Frank, *German Romantic Painting Redefined* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001), 3.

⁶ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1980), 9.

which lead to the rise of Neoclassicism. The Napoleonic invasion after the revolution sparked a new sense of patriotism in Germans, which inspired the formations of a new government based on those of Prussian and French occupations. Germans began to long for sense of identity, the solutions to which they believed lay in the past.

Paradoxically, the Romantic period is considered a medieval and religious revivalism, but it is also held to be anti-classicist. This period is so diverse in nature that it helps to define it in two phases: the early phase founded itself on nationalistic ideals and a reactionary rebellion against both the existing classical artistic canon and its dogma and the later phase which is regarded as an extension of earlier principals of “irony, idealism and the philosophy of subjectivity.”⁷ The focus of this discussion will be first and foremost on the ideologically charged beginnings of Romanticism.

The Romantic period finds its roots as an insurgence against Neoclassicism which was the dominating premise of the late eighteenth century. Neoclassicism was based on the philosophical writings of Johann Winckelmann. It was Winckelmann’s short text *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* that incited an international neoclassical movement across civilized Europe. It was his belief that with the effort to imitate the classical “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” that the lost virtues of the ancients could be found.⁸ Stylistically Winckelmann’s new canon recommended painters to follow the volumetric and linear emphasis (Umbrian manner) to imitate the pathos he felt made antique art so great. These ideas of a German art critic were not only regional in influence, but impacted many European academies.

⁷ Mitchell Benjamin Frank, German Romantic Painting Redefined (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001), 2.

⁸ Winckelmann, “Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture,” in The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology. ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

This social interchange of ideas was made possible with technological advancements. The aid of Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press enabled Winckelmann's ideas to be spread and discussed internationally. The printing press permitted the mass dispersment of literature and in turn new ideas, fueling political and intellectual movements across Europe. Germans, in particular, were united under the influential literature of Tieck, Schlegel, Novalis, Goethe, Kant and monastic author Wackenroder, who were able to incite new thought and promote a critical analysis of politics, social norms, and even artistic methodology.

Philosophic developments around the beginning of the nineteenth century brought conflict between the acceptance of "Art as imitation of the antique" and "Art as representation of nature." Author Ulrich Finke recognizes French art theoretician Charles Batteux as having great importance, because of his belief that the imitation of the antique was quite simply a "surrogate for the imitation of nature," as maintained in his book *Reduction of the Fine Arts to a Single Principle*.⁹ The fault of dealing with nature at such a distance was on rejected by many German artists. Landscape artist Otto Runge contests Winckelmann's approach explaining that "we are no longer Greeks and when we contemplate their perfect works of art we can no longer feel the totality in the way they did."¹⁰ Although Winckelmann's neoclassicism focused on the human figure and classical composition, around the turn of the century painting progressed into a primacy of portraiture and landscape of the mid- to late Romantic period. The transition involved is often credited to the work of a group of painters called the Nazarenes. Their new study of form and reality justified art becoming an expression of nature, moreover a *magnum opus* of God. This Neo-Platonism was of critical importance to the Nazarenes, a pivotal group in Romantic beginnings.

⁹ Ulrich Finke, *German Painting: from Romanticism to Expressionism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1974), 9.

¹⁰ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England, Yale University Press, 1980), 26.

Stylistically, many early German Romantic artists imitated the High Renaissance manner of painting in opposition to the classic. The Romantics, in the adoption of High Renaissance style also inherited their old dispute between *disegno* and *colorito* approaches. Many became partial to the Venetian style (*colorito*), focusing on light and color, which contrasted the Umbrian style (*disegno*) of draftsmanship and utilization of orthogonal elements that Winckelmann idealized. Heinrich Wölfflin recognizes the fusion of *disegno* and *colorito* that took place among Romantic artists:

Linear vision is permanently bound up with a certain idea of beauty and so is a painterly vision. If an advanced type of art dissolves the line and replaces it by restless mass, that happens not only in the interests of a new verisimilitude, but in the interests of a new beauty too.¹¹

With this example Wölfflin respectively identifies this synthesis as a way style progressed from one era into the next. German artist Johann Friedrich Overbeck is one such visionary who furthered this new style.

Like most Romantic artists Overbeck was highly influenced by fourteenth and fifteenth century painters as well as those of the High Renaissance era. Particularly taken with the great Renaissance painter Raphael, Overbeck went to great lengths to imitate his Venetian style (Figures 1-4). Distinguished from works of fellow artists Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, Raphael's figures are noticeably painted with a very distinct style of *chiaroscuro*, for a very smooth, finished appearance free of evident brush strokes.¹² Overbeck developed a very similar style to that of Raphael's, however with fundamental differences. Primarily, Overbeck compositionally simplified the work, focusing on form and shading to create very soft emotional subjects.

¹¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, "Principles of Art History," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118.

¹² Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, 2nd Ed. (New York, NY: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2002), 952.

The strong religious motifs of the Renaissance (attributed to church patrons) were also very prevalent in nineteenth-century German art. However, the Reformation of the mid-thirteenth century had created a schism between Protestant northeast and Catholic southwest Germania. The religious ideology of Protestantism strictly limited the integration of art in church, removing the North from much religious patronage and monumental forms of religious art such as frescos. Northern artists such as Overbeck found these reasons more than enough to immigrate to the south.

In 1806 Overbeck left his home in Lübeck, Germany to go study at the *Vienna Akademie* in Austria. It was here that Overbeck developed strong artistic principles and became friends with artist Franz Pforr, who shared his strong religious ideals. Eventually together they seceded from the academy and by 1810 Overbeck and Pforr had found Rome a much more accommodating atmosphere for their ideologies.

In Rome, Overbeck and Franz Pforr lead a new group of artists often known as the Nazarenes. Ideologically the Nazarenes, created their work with a new focus on Christian ethos. After their renunciation of the neoclassical manner taught at the *Vienna Akademie* they were joined by fellow artists Eberhard Wächter, Lucas Vogel, Johann Konrad Hottinger, Josef Wintergerst and Joseph Sutter.¹³ These artists were heavily influenced by Wilhelm Wackenroder's book *Heartfelt Effusions of an Art-loving Monk* which had two key points of emphasis. Firstly that art is a form of worship, emphasizing religion in nature. The idea of landscape as a devotional device was entirely unprecedented, making it a unique trait of the Romantic period. Secondly, art maintains its validity by its own national individuality.¹⁴ In this second argument, Wackenroder renounces Winckelmann's ideal that all arts are held in

¹³ Ulrich Finke, *German Painting: from Romanticism to Expressionism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1974), 49

¹⁴ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1980), 163-164

comparison to the classical model. This argument (paralleling Wölfflin's thoughts cited earlier in this paper) appears to having had great impact on Nazarene ideology.

Johann Friedrich Overbeck exemplifies not only the ideological traits of the Nazarene, but also stylistic transformations in his piece *Italia und Germania* (Figure 5.) Although this work is most known for being representational of the underlying foundation of German heritage, *Italia und Germania* was actually initially a response to Franz Pforr's 1810 diptych *Sulamith und Maria* (Figure 6). Originally, what started out in 1815 as tribute to Pforr's earlier work, Overbeck's composition of the same women, changed dramatically during the painting process, in which the content and meaning were modified. While painting *Italia und Germania* Overbeck wrote to his friend Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias Werner (a German poet, dramatist and preacher),

[Italia and Germania] are both somewhat elements, that on one hand, confront each other with a foreign presence, but however my mission is now to melt them into one. It is on one hand a tribute to the homeland and on the other, a charm of everything beautiful and lordly, for which I am thankful to enjoy presently.¹⁵

Overbeck paraphrases Pforr's work by bringing both women together, romanticizing their friendship. They are taken out of their clearly separated lives and brought together for a completely different feeling than Pforr intended. Many details, such as iconographical elements which make *Sulamith und Maria* a unique work of art, are left out. Stylistically the composition had become simplified and smoothed, making it distinctly Venetian in style.

There is also an introduction of religious intention, which is essential for Overbeck's style. The sibling-like connection between the two women embodies the typological scheme of

¹⁵ Ulrich Pietsch, *Johann Friedrich Overbeck: Italien als Vorbild* (Lübeck: Wullenwever-Druck Heine KG, 1989), 142.

biblical interpretations through phases of art history.¹⁶ This comparison indicates transition in which the Old Testament paved the way for the New Testament, while connecting Germany's heritage to Italy. The message of *Italia und Germania* is not one of violence or political disputes, but a harmonious melting of two peoples.

The nationalistic elements of *Italia und Germania* are also combined in a way much different from Pforr's original use. The traits which signify the women's respective backgrounds are not removed, but rather softly incorporated. Behind *Italia* an Etruscan villa sprawls across the landscape and the Mediterranean sits below the horizon. Behind *Germania* lays a gothic city with buildings towering one above the other and the majestic Alps mask the horizon. Both figures wear traditional garments and laurel wreaths on their heads unifying them.

Italia und Germania embodied many of the symptomatic characteristics of the Romantic period. The strong romantic quality of aspiration or longing is unmistakable: the north drawing firmly from the south, from its art, its nature, its poetry. Overbeck most likely intended that we witness an ecclesiastical aura, seen traditionally in Christian art, a formation of a sensitive sublime between beings. This interaction we observe is strikingly similar to Overbeck's *Verkündigung und Heimsuchung* (Figure 3). The Annunciation and Visitation was a very popular biblical Gothic art diptych featuring an angel's announcement to Mary that she is pregnant with Christ and Mary's visitation with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.¹⁷ Both *Italia und Germania* and *Verkündigung und Heimsuchung* feature a pair of women: one a chosen woman and the other the messenger coming to give notice to the other and make her conscious of what she possesses. Overbeck discovers a *new* holy story in *Italia und Germania*: the artistic rebirth, which is the result of the cooperation of both Italian and German art.

¹⁶ Werner Hofmann, *Wie deutsch ist die deutsche Kunst?* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Verlag, 1999), 70-71.

¹⁷ Marilyn Stokstad. *Art History*, 2nd Ed. (New York, NY: Prentice Hall, Inc, 2002) 576.

Although it may appear that Overbeck secularized the content of this painting in the face of his own Christian art tradition, this allegory of a woman's friendship was a symbol for a sublime holy message, which Overbeck carried out in the name of religion. Religion would be the subject of the majority of his work, as he felt that it was the foundation of art. Overbeck's 1840 *Triumph of Religion in the Arts* (Figure 4) is very indicative of Overbeck's typical subject matter and style.

One thing that Overbeck and the Nazarenes produced in their revival of religious art was also the revival of fresco painting techniques. Since the introduction of oil paints and the spread of Protestantism the technique had been learned by few and had been nearly forgotten. The revival of this process of monumental works was an amazing technical achievement. Unfortunately, the frescos produced by the Nazarenes were not well accepted in Rome, because they were often compared to and overshadowed by the original frescos of Michelangelo and Raphael. However, in Germany they were greeted welcomingly by critics, in that they provided Germans with a monumental art, which they felt reflective of themselves. The fruits of early German Romantic artists, monumental frescoes were however temporary as Romantic ideals were turned towards landscape and portraiture, whose agenda did not accommodate the fresco technique very well.

However, fresco painters of the early Romantic period found many opportunities in Bavaria where Ludwig I established numerous public cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, catholic churches and decorated recreational grounds.¹⁸ For monumental and religious artists, like the Nazarenes, this catholic region offered more opportunities than any other part of Germania. By the mid-nineteenth century the industrial revolution had reached Germania and with that the middle class saw a substantial increase in wealth, known as *nouveau riches*. The shift in patronage to the bourgeoisie brought the production of art all over Germania as well as

¹⁸ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1980), 18

changes in its ideology. The secularization of art around the mid-nineteenth century removed much of the religious subject matter and placed a higher emphasis on portraiture and landscape, catering to middle-class desires.

By strengthening the development of bourgeoisie patronage Germania witnessed the rise of art unions across its land. These unions were fundamentally different from academies, in that they were free of royal patronage and financed completely by the public.¹⁹ The Romantic painter from Dresden Adrian Ludwig Richter wrote,

They have educated a broad section of the public, which now takes an active interest in the manifold directions of art and often approaches it with a refinement of understanding that was not previously there. How many talents used to perish lamentably through the death of every kind of commission...²⁰

Although Richter identifies that artists were liberated with a variety of patronage; however artists still had to adhere to the demands of their patrons, binding most artists thematically. Thanks to a centralized art community German art finally had artistic roots in Germany. Early Romantics considered Rome as the artistic capital of their fatherland, but the secularization of art allowed painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich, Otto Runge and other painters of the *Dresden Akademie*, to bring it back to Germany.

A current of shapes, a thicket of shapes, an insurgence of shapes – this was a style Heinrich Wölfflin attributed specifically to the German Romantic period.²¹ This unique style was met for the most part optimistically, despite the European universal ideals whether they be Neoclassical or Renaissance. There was concern in nineteenth century Germania that a canon wholly adopted would be detrimental to German individuality. German Romantic author and

¹⁹ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1980), 18
²⁰ William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1980), 21
²¹ Werner Hofmann, *Wie deutsch ist die deutsche Kunst?* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Verlag, 1999), 72.

painter Hans von Marées once wrote in concern to dispute over the rigidness of an artistic canon, "We don't believe in the worth of rules alone, but rather feel that there is a shot of irrationality in all living things."²² It was this ingenuity, mentality and desire that brought Germans to establish themselves amongst their European adversaries as individuals and as a solidarity on several levels.

The Nazarenes who fought the neoclassical canon and redefined High Renaissance ideals looked critically to the past as well as to the future. It was this that made them the first Modern movement. Overbeck contributed to this through his development of an early German style by synthesizing the late Gothic and Italian Renaissance. This was clearly not simply a reaction to stylistic preference, but rather a society's reaction to a changing world. In the end we can see how Overbeck's *Italia und Germania* accurately embodies the Romantic Zeitgeist.

²² Werner Hofmann, Wie deutsch ist die deutsche Kunst? (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Verlag, 1999), 70.

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Illustrations



Figure 1.
Raphael, Die Auffindung des
Mosesknaben, 1517/19, Vatican,
Rome



Figure 2.
Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Die
Auffindung des Mosesknaben, 1820/24,
Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany

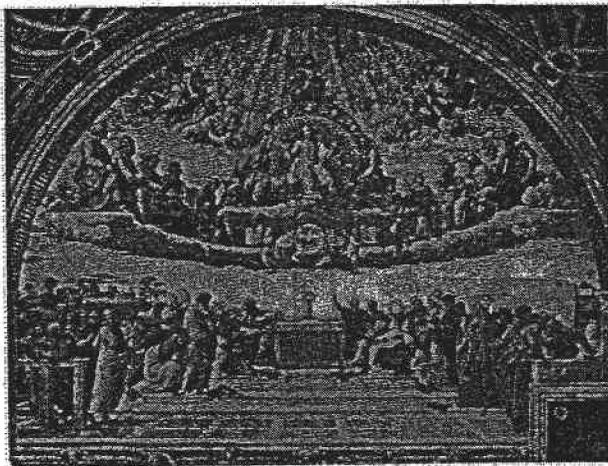


Figure 3.
Raphael, Disputa, 1509/11, Vatican,
Rome

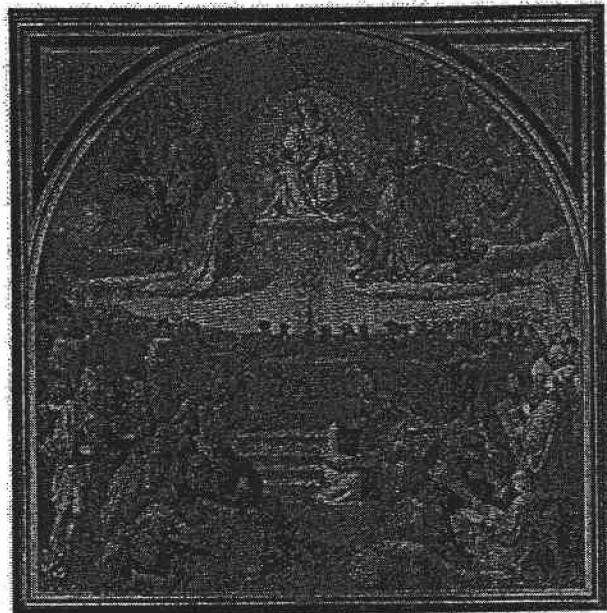


Figure 4.
Johann Friedrich Overbeck, *Der Triumph
der Religion in den Künsten*, 1831, oil on
canvas, Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches
Kunstinstitut, Nazarener



Figure 5.
Johann Friedrich
Overbeck, *Italia und
Germania*, 1828, Oil on
canvas. Bayerische
Staatgemäldesammlung
en Munich, Neue
Pinakothek



Figure 6.
Franz Pforr, *Sulamith
und Maria*, 1810, Oil
on canvas.,
Schweinfurt, Slg
Schäfer



Figure 7.
 Johann Friedrich
 Overbeck,
*Verkündigung und
 Heimsuchung*,
 Drawing, Basel,
 Kunstmuseum

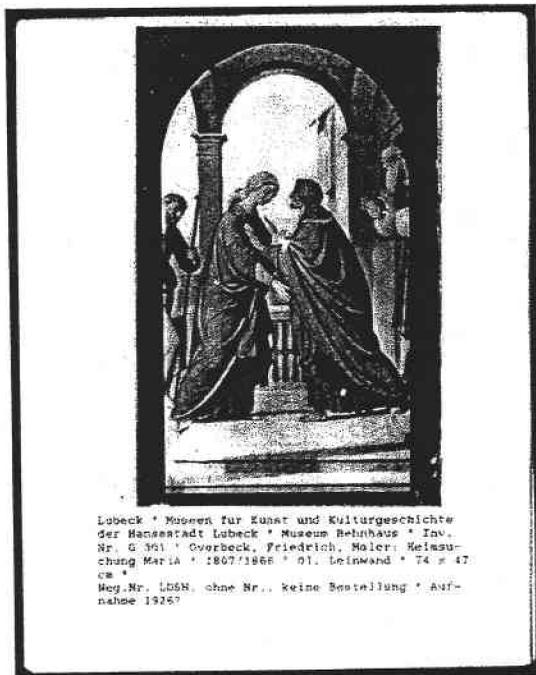


Figure 8.
 Johann Friedrich
 Overbeck, *Der Triumph
 der Religion in den
 Künsten*, 1831, oil on
 canvas, Frankfurt am
 Main, Städelsches
 Kunstinstitut,
 Nazarener

Lübeck * Museen für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte
 der Hansestadt Lübeck * Museum Behnhaus * Inv.
 Nr. G 391 * Overbeck, Friedrich, Maler, Heimsu-
 chung Maria * 1807/1866 * Öl, Leinwand * 74 x 47
 cm *
 Reg.Nr. L65N, ohne Nr., keine Bestellung * Auf-
 nahme 1926?