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Narrative in Art Throughout History

This essay will delve into the strong presence of narrative throughout art history and how it has been incorporated through artists' work such as Henry Fuseli, a Swiss painter who is known for his fantastical paintings during the 18th century, and art movements such as the Romanticism movement. Narrative art is something that gives visual form to multiple stories. Using imagery and symbols, these stories are woven with deep meaning and reflect human experiences and emotions.

Narrative art allows us to build a visual of the story that is portrayed and the time and environment in which the work was created. For instance, during the seventeenth-century paintings that showed everyday life became widespread, although "Their works were highly sanitised visions, designed to appeal to the sensibilities of those attending the exhibitions and not to disturb their peace of mind." (National Museums Liverpool, n.d.) Meaning that the artists wouldn't represent the cruder aspects of the time.



Martineau, R.B. (1896). *The Last Day in the Old Home*. [Oil paint on canvas].

According to *The Lucas Museum (2022) of Narrative art* “the term “narrative art” first appeared in the mid-1960s.” Still, it has been seen throughout time in the forms of religion, mythology, history, and literature. Some of the oldest known art, such as cave paintings and carvings, have narrative aspects and can even help us reflect and learn about the people who created them. For example, Alistair W.G. Pike, head of archaeological sciences at the University of Southampton in the U.K. explained that Neanderthals likely left their art in locations that they viewed as special, and “The significance of the painting is not to know that Neanderthals could paint, it’s the fact that they were engaging in symbolism,” Pike says. “And that’s probably related to an ability to have language.” (Pike, n.d)

This research into the cave paintings shows us that narrative can be found woven throughout history and portraying ideas and thoughts through symbols. We can also see how these symbols change throughout time, as cultures and socials change, or how they travel across different cultures and keep their meaning the same. Mathew Wilson explains symbols throughout history as

Many motifs were transported by global networks of trade, the spread of religious beliefs, acts of colonization and the forced interactions of peoples as a result of war. The study of symbols tells us much about unexpected interferences between world cultures of the past.

(Wilson, 2020, p 7)

Although symbols are seen throughout the majority of art, the use of symbolism is thought to have truly come to light during the romanticism movement. Romanticism is a “Term in use by the early nineteenth century to describe the movement in art and literature distinguished by a new interest in human psychology, expression of personal feeling and interest in the natural world.” (Tate, 2017) Romanticism was a shift away from the ‘Age of Reason’, a time when people started to value scientific reason over blind faith and superstition. Some viewed the ‘Age of Reason’ as too confining, so the Romanticism movement began, allowing people to focus on emotion rather than reason.

Henry Fuseli is an example of an artist during the 18th century who contributed to the Romanticism movement. Fuseli was a Swiss painter who used tone and imagery throughout all his artwork to depict unnerving portraits that dealt with dark and supernatural subject matter. Unlike many paintings from the period, Fuseli's portraits were not narratives drawn from history, the Bible, or literature. Instead, Fuseli's work were inventions from his imagination and therefore had no moralizing subject which was uncommon for the time.

At the time Fuseli was more commonly known for his writings and lectures than his paintings. However, during the annual Royal Academy exhibition in London in 1782, Fuseli's painting '*The Nightmare*' was displayed and began to gain notoriety. The painting caused dismay among the public for its controversial subject matter, and people found issues with the lack of moral issues and connection to God or biblical mythology. A review written at the time for *The Morning Chronicle* (1782) wrote

The Nightmare, by Mr Fuseli like all his productions has strong marks of genius about it; but hag-riding is too unpleasant a thought to be agreeable to anyone, and is unfit for furniture or reflection – Qui Bono?... Yet surely a disagreeable subject, well-executed, is preferable to the most engaging one ill-described.

(*The Morning Chronicle*, 1782)

Although Fuseli's work was seen to be controversial and was met with negative reviews some appreciated his work, writers, painters, and poets among them, and Fuseli was able to land a prestigious placement at the Academy after the exhibition took place. Even after the exhibition came to an end Fuseli's work was still desirable to the point where he created prints of his work which were affordable to most people. This did however have an impact on his image as an artist, as during the time this would have been seen as "cheapening" his work, and thus people "Generally viewed his art history writings and lectures as a genius, but his artwork and even personality as slightly eccentric." (TheCollector, 2021)



The Nightmare by Henry Fuseli, 1781, via the Detroit Institute of Arts

To understand Fuseli's work, it is important to understand the historical context of his life as well as how semiotics is used to analyse such work. In Gillian Rose's *'Visual Methodologies an Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials'* she explains how "visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledge." (Rose, 2001)

The portrait itself presents a woman dressed in white and draped across a dishevelled bed, which starkly contrasts the dark and forbidding interior. The figure that sits upon her chest has often been referred to as an incubus, a demon in a male form which often seeks to have sexual intercourse with sleeping women, and a black horse emerges from the dark red drapery. This composition presents a dark and obscure scene, but the way that Fuseli uses the chiaroscuro technique, the use of contrast between light and dark to emphasize and illuminate important figures in a painting, enhances the theatricality of the painting.

Historians who have studied this portrait have considered whether the woman who appears to be the focus of the piece, as she is illuminated in the spotlight, was Anna

Landolt. Around the time that Fuseli was painting *The Nightmare*, he was wrapped up in an unrequited romance with Anna Landolt who was engaged to another. Fuseli even wrote about a dream he had of them together. The pairing of the incubus and the woman could be connected to this with the incubus representing Fuseli's subconscious desire for the woman he loves but cannot have. However, Fuseli never revealed his specific intentions for the painting and as the scene is not overly explicit it is left up to interpretation as to whether the scene depicts a woman simply sleeping and consumed by nightmares or Fuseli's sexual and romantic frustrations (Paulson, 2018).

The red drapery, although a small aspect of the painting, greatly impacts the scene. The colour red has many connotations ranging from anger and heat to passion and love; similarly, curtains may signify many things, such as secrets or a theatrical performance. As Paulson (2018) points out, Fuseli's work often illustrated scenes from Shakespeare and Milton, and the drapery is not only the backdrop to the scene but is also seen to be spilling off the bed which could suggest a river of blood as it may be enacted on a stage.

In the initial drawings, it was noted by Fuseli's friend and biographer John Knowles, that the black horse was not seen in the composition but was later added to the painting. Burke (2021) notes that, Culturally, horses have always had an important standing whether in the tales of the Greek gods or companions on the battlefield and are often seen as a symbol of male power. However, Fuseli has cast the horse in darkness and red drapery creating more morbid undertones. The term 'mare' refers to a female horse but is also a reference to a creature in folklore that is rather like the incubus where it rides on people's chests during sleep and evokes dark nightmares (Residency, 2013).

The consensus of many artistic elites at the time the painting was created was that Henry Fuseli's work was foolhardy and scandalous. Nevertheless, his work resonated with the Gothic and Romantic art and literary movements which solidified his place in art history. His work still holds its fascinating lure and draws people to contemplate its visual complexity (TheCollector, 2021).

To conclude, this essay has delved into a few main ideas surrounding the idea of narrative in art. Fuseli is one example of many where the viewer can analyse the narrative within his work, which is further helped by using historical context and semiotics. Narrative has been entwined through art for centuries and continues to be a prominent aspect of any craft. Each piece of art can help us to understand past events and cultures more thoroughly by analysing how the narratives adapt and change through environments and perspectives.

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