

# Romanticism: Friedrich Schlegel, Excerpts from Selected Works (1798–1804)

## Abstract

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In the following excerpts from *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798), *The Fundamentals of Gothic Architecture* (1803), and *Appeal to Painters of the Present Day* (1804), the writer, philosopher, poet, and literary critic [Friedrich Schlegel](#) (1772–1829) describes the characteristics of Romantic poetry. *Athenaeum*, a literary magazine edited by Schlegel and his brother August Wilhelm from 1798 to 1800, was the leading mouthpiece for early Romanticism. The magazine featured literary fragments, and in this respect was uniquely well-suited to the Romantic movement, which took incompleteness as a leading theme. The following excerpts on Gothic architecture and painting identify two additional sources of Romantic inspiration: the ornamental imitation of nature in Gothic architecture and wild, uncorrupted nature itself.

## Source

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### I. From *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798)

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Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its destiny is not merely to reunite all of the different genres and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. Romantic poetry wants to and should combine and fuse poetry and prose, genius and criticism, art poetry and nature poetry. It should make poetry lively and sociable and make life and society poetic. It should poeticize wit and fill all of art's forms with sound material of every kind to form the human soul, to animate it with flights of humor. Romantic poetry embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest art systems, which contain within them still more systems, all the way down to the sigh, the kiss that a poeticizing child breathes out in an artless song. Romantic poetry can lose itself in what is represented to the extent that one might believe that it exists solely to characterize poetic individuals of all types. But there is not yet a form which is fit to fully express an author's spirit. Thus many artists who only wanted to write a novel ended up presenting a kind of self-portrait. It alone is able to become a mirror of the entire surrounding world, an image of their age in the same manner as an epic. And yet it is Romantic poetry that can best glide between the portrayer and what is portrayed, free from all real and ideal interests. On the wings of poetic reflection, it can raise that reflection to a higher power and multiply it in an endless row of mirrors. Romantic poetry is capable of the highest and most comprehensive refinement [*Bildung*] – not merely from the inside out, but also from the outside in. In everything that should be a whole among its products, it organizes all parts similarly, through which a vision of an infinitely expanding classicism is opened. Romantic poetry is to the arts what wit is to philosophy and what society, company, friendship, and love are in life. Other kinds of poetry are finished and can now be fully analyzed. The Romantic form of poetry is still in the process of becoming. Indeed, that is its true essence, that it is always in the process of becoming and can never be completed. It cannot be exhausted by any theory, and only a divinatory criticism would dare to want to characterize its ideal. Romantic poetry alone is infinite, just as it alone is free and recognizes as its first law that the poetic will submit itself to no other law. The Romantic kind of poetry is the only one which is more than a kind – it is poetry itself. For, in a certain sense, all poetry is or should be Romantic.

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## II. From *The Fundamentals of Gothic Architecture* (1803)

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[On the architecture in Cambrai] Wonderful style of architecture! springing from the highest story of the tower, it seems to pierce the clouds like a transparent obelisk, or pyramid of open tracery! more pointed and slender than the one, it is less so than the other, and formed of slender shafts, clustering together, with various flowers and crockets, it terminates at length in a slender spire and finial.

The design of most Gothic towers is similar, although very few of them have ever been finished.

I have a decided predilection for the Gothic style of architecture; and when I am so fortunate as to discover any monument, however ruined or defaced, I examine every portion of it with unwearied zeal and attention, for it appears to me that from a neglect of such study the deep meaning and peculiar motive of Gothic architecture is seldom fully arrived at.

It unites an extreme delicacy and inconceivable skill in mechanical execution, with the grand, the boundless, and infinite, concentrated in the idea of an entire Gothic fabric; a rare and truly beautiful combination of contrasting elements, conceived by the power of human intellect, and aiming at faultless perfection in the minutest details, as well as in the lofty grandeur and comprehensiveness of the general design.

No art ought ever to be permitted to encroach upon its sister arts. The ancient classic monuments at Athens, Pæstum, and Girgenti would undoubtedly, if seen in their native clime, excite feelings of veneration, in the same manner as the feeble designs and gigantic works of Egyptian, Persian, or Indian antiquity inspire wonder and astonishment. But what with us is usually styled Grecian art is merely a copy, a soulless imitation of the period when Greek art was in its decline, and an agreeable but most unmeaning symmetry had replaced that grandeur of soul and expression which had too long been lost.

The Gothic may possibly be styled in the next work on architecture the German style, from its having been common among all the nations of ancient Germany, and the grandest, heretofore called Gothic, edifices in Italy, France, and even in Spain, being also the work of German architects. This old Teutonic architecture certainly requires some effort of the mind to penetrate its unfathomable obscurity. It flourished most in the Netherlands, and appears to have attained there its highest perfection, scarcely a town in Brabant being without one or more remarkable monuments of that art.

However, the general title of "Gothic Architecture," if that great national name be taken in its widest sense, for the old Christian and Romantic style of the Middle Ages, from Theodoric down to the present time, is decidedly the most appropriate, and must ever be retained. I may remark also that the apparently arbitrary epithet of Romantic, applied to medieval poetry, so completely expresses the prevalence of fancy in that art, that it seems impossible to exchange it for any other term equally significant and appropriate.

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[On the Cologne cathedral] This noble work, considered in an architectural point of view, affords an example of all the beauties of the second floriated Gothic style. The same figures of the triangle and the square, the circle and the quatrefoil, form the groundwork of all those decorations, which, as in the early Christian, are introduced with a more profound attention to the scientific structure of the building. But these no longer appear in naked simplicity and geometrical exactness; they are all veiled with clustering foliage and the luxuriance of vegetable life: as in the enamelled carpet of spring, we cannot, amid its verdant productions, clearly discern the precise geometrical symmetry of each isolated form, but see all bloom and unfold their beauty together, in one general glow of life and immortality! The very existence

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of Gothic architecture seems bound up with the luxuriance of its forms and floriation. Hence the unvaried repetition of the same decorations, their plant-like similarity, and the deeply expressive, yet tranquil mystery, the joyous loveliness and animation, which fill every beholder with reverence and admiration. The symbolism of Gothic architecture is, indeed, of the highest order; that of painting appears feeble in comparison with it, and its allusions to divinity embarrassed and uncertain. Architecture, on the contrary, by its imitation of the beauties of nature, brings the idea of the Divinity palpably before our minds, even without any direct allusion to the mysteries of Christianity. Christian faith and hope had, however, no trifling influence on the development of ecclesiastical architecture.

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Voyage up the Rhine.

The most beautiful scenery on the Rhine begins a little above Bonn. Richly enamelled meadow land extends like a deep valley between hills and mountains, stretching down to the influx of the Moselle at Coblenz, and from thence to St. Goar and Bingen, gradually narrowing as it advances, the rocks become more steep and the prospect wilder and more sublime. The Rhine is here most charming, enlivened on its course by the populous shores, overhanging rocks, and ruined castles, it appears more like a painting, the intentional creation of some artist's genius, than a merely accidental combination of nature. The first of the many ruins situated on the Rhine, which we passed in ascending from the flat country upwards, is Godesberg, beautiful, not so much from its majestic situation as from the rich prospect it commands. The Drachenfels next appearing, seem to kindle in the mind glowing anticipations of all the strange wild fastnesses which crown the rocky shores of our mighty river. Such ruins as these are often viewed with a sort of sentimental tranquility, as it were, forming a Romantic background, indispensably necessary to the development of the favorite feelings of the day; or, it may be, only as robber castles, which, in times of peace and order, were of course demolished, and which must ever remain in ruins. Many, unquestionably, were such; perhaps, most of those the ruins of which we now contemplate; but it is not just always to associate the idea of its latest degradation with the image of the thing itself, and thus in a moment blunt every feeling of sympathy for the noble memorials of departed ages. A candid investigation of historical records will probably show that many of these castles existed for centuries before those perpetual wars between the nobles and rich burghers of which we now read so much, centuries before the feudal law, public peace, &c., were even thought of; nay, that the German race have ever shown so remarkable a predilection for dwelling upon rocks or lofty mountains, that it may almost be regarded as a national characteristic. A severe and noble taste! Even now, one glance at the height above seems to place us in another world. It is inspiriting and refreshing to quit the dull monotony of the plain and inhale life and vigor from the clear atmosphere there encircling us. If we, who but occasionally and with fatigue reach the summit, feel at once that its breath inspires us with new life and courage, how invigorating must it be to dwell always there, with the earth in her richest attire lying outspread beneath; the changes of nature, at all periods of the day and in all seasons of the year, seem invested with new interest; the passing clouds, the blossoming of early spring, the moonlit summer night, nay, even the autumnal storm and the snowy fields of winter, all have their charms. Those places only, to me, seem beautiful which men call rude and wild; for those alone are grand, and grandeur and sublimity are essential elements of perfect beauty, for by them our souls are elevated and purified. The joyous aspect of a highly cultivated champaign country cannot fail, after long imprisonment in towns, to arouse agreeable thoughts, for the blooming charms of nature have a more than ordinarily powerful and soothing influence on the heart when rarely seen; but the sweet sensation of repose that they communicate has no power to awaken dreams of the mighty past. A rock, on the contrary, stands amid the spirit-treasures of wild nature, like a speaking memorial of elemental wars, telling of the fierce combat which once wrenched it from the dis severed earth around, and the eternal impression it leaves is ever unenfeebled and unsubdued. As the rustling of the forest, the murmur of the fountain, plunge us always into a soothing melancholy; as the wild cry of solitary birds calls up a mingled feeling of unrest, a yearning for freedom and solitude; so nature herself seems eternally present in her ancient mountains,

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those monuments which recall to us the grandest features of history, and awaken such profound and majestic ideas, as the luxuriance of a level landscape could never inspire. How greatly is this impression heightened, when amid the ruins of nature, we also recognize the hand of man! Lofty fortresses erected on savage rocks; the monuments of human heroism associating itself on every cliff with the hero-times of nature.

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### **III. From *Appeal to Painters of the Present Day* (1804)**

Is it probable that in this present time we shall see either the rise or the permanent establishment of a grand original school of painting? Outward appearances would lead us to reply in the negative; but can we assert its utter impossibility? It is true, certainly, there are no modern artists capable of competing with the great masters of antiquity, and the points in which our attempts are most deficient appear also tolerably clear: partly, a neglect of technical proprieties in the coloring, and, still more, the absence of deep and genuine feeling. Modern artists even of the most judicious and well-directed talents are often found deficient in productive activity; in that certainty and facility of execution which was so peculiar a feature in the old schools. When we consider the infinite number of great compositions which Raphael produced, although snatched away in the bloom of age and the zenith of his fame, or the iron industry of the genuine Dürer, displayed in his innumerable creations of every kind, executed on the most various materials, although to him also a long term of years was denied, we shrink from comparing our own puny period with the vast proportions of that majestic epoch. Yet this is easily accounted for. The habit of universal painting, and the intellectual vanity which was a prevailing bias in the genius and art of our forefathers, naturally led to the breaking up of its spiritual strength, since these properties were most incompatible with the progressive development and final perfection of any one distinct branch. To this source we may refer the separation now existing, in a greater or less degree, between all the intellectual and imitative productions of our time; but in regard to the art of painting, the following observations deserve to be noted as of primary importance. Deep feeling is the only true source of lofty art, and as in our time everything is opposed to this feeling, struggling, as it were, either to destroy, repress, overwhelm, or lead it astray into the by-paths of error, the first portion of an artist's life is consumed in a preliminary struggle, ere the mind can enfranchise its powers from all the unspeakable difficulties imposed by the spirit of the time; a struggle unavoidably necessary, in order to unseal the spring of correct artistic feeling, and free it from the encumbering rubbish of the destroying outer world around.

A highly intellectual nature, spurning the trammels and conventionalities of the day, and rising in daring opposition to the ruling spirit, must ever concentrate its powers within itself, and can rarely attain great vivacity in the creative faculty of imagination. Thus we may account for the slow appreciation of ancient art in our day; but pressing onward with unshaken ardor in spite of all obstacles, it will at length attain a brighter future, and bloom out with new and glorious life in the realms of beauty and inspiration. There appears to be an unfathomable mystery in the fact that some periods, by their own will alone, and apparently without any outward stimulus, become so rich in art, so happy in their artistic productions, while others seem to expend their energy in vain, meeting with no corresponding nor even adequate success in their intellectual productions. It is impossible fully to unravel the mystery, and we must depend only on facts well known and understood, which will prove amply sufficient to guide us to the source of all lofty works of art, and the proper means and materials to be employed; this will lead to the working out of scientific principles, and the conservation of everything beautiful in Christian art, although without the especial gifts of nature, the summit of artistic excellence will ever remain unapproachable.

The one true fountain of beauty and the art is *feeling*. It is *feeling* which reveals to us true ideas and correct intentions, and gives that indefinable charm, never to be conveyed in words, but which the hand of the painter, guided by the poet's soul alone, can diffuse throughout all his works. From religious

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feeling, love, and devotion, arose the silent inborn inspiration of the old masters: few, indeed, now seek their hallowed inspiration or tread the paths by which alone they could attain it, or emulate that earnest endeavor to work out the principle of serious and noble philosophy which is discoverable in the works of Dürer and Leonardo. Vain will be every effort to recall the genius of the art, until we summon to our aid, if not religion, at least the idea of it, by means of a system of Christian philosophy founded on religion. Still, if young artists deem this road too distant or too difficult of attainment, let them at least study deeply the principles of poetry, in which the same spirit ever breathes and moves. Not so much the poetry of the Greeks, now familiar only to strangers and the learned, or read through the medium of translations from which every poetical association is banished by the wooden clapper-clang of the dactyls, but rather the Romantic genre – Shakespeare, and the best Italian and Spanish dramatists, those also of the old German poems which are most accessible, and next such modern productions as are dictated by the spirit of romance. These should be the constant companions of the youthful artist, and will lead him back to the fairy-land of old Romantic days, chasing from his eyes the prosaic mist engendered by imitation of the pagan antique, and the unsound babble of conventional art. Still every effort will be fruitless, unless the painter be endowed with earnest religious feeling, genuine devotion, and immortal faith. Fancy sporting with the symbols of Catholicism, uninspired by that love which is stronger than death, will never attain exalted Christian beauty.

In what, then, does this exalted beauty consist? It is of the first importance to analyze the good and evil tendency of all theories of the art. Whoever has not himself discovered the fountain of life can never successfully guide others to the source, or unfold to them the glorious revelations of the painter's art; he will rather wander perplexed amid the dreamy visions of mere external representations, and the creation of his imagination, being totally void of expression and character, will become in fact a mere nonentity. The true object of the art should be, instead of resting in externals, to lead the mind upwards into a more exalted region and a spiritual world. While false-mannered artists, content with the empty glitter of a pleasing imitation, soar no higher, nor ever seek to reach that lofty sphere, in which genuine beauty is portrayed according to certain defined ideas of natural characteristics. It finds on its path the most vivid development of all sensible forms; the fascination of grace, the highest natural bloom of youthful beauty, yet endowed rather with sensual fascination than the inspired loveliness of the soul. When heathen artists attempt to take a higher range, they wander into exaggerated forms of Titanic strength and severity, or melt into the solemn mournfulness of tragic beauty, and this last is the loftiest point of art that they can ever reach, and in which they do sometimes approach nearly to immortality. Here, however, their lofty flight is terminated: the path of spiritual beauty is barred on the one hand by a Titan-like exaggeration, striving to take heaven and the divinity by violence, yet failing in the power to accomplish its endeavor; on the other by an eternal grief, for ever plunged in mortal agony, in the hopeless bondage of its own unalterable doom. The light of hope dawned not on heathen intelligence; impassioned grief and tragic beauty bounded their purest aspirations. Yet this blessed light of hope, borne on the wings of trusting faith and sinless love, though on earth it breaks forth only in dim anticipations of a glorious hereafter, – this glorious hope, radiant with immortality, invests every picture of the Christian era with a bright harmony of expression, and fixes our attention by its clear comprehension of heavenly things, and an elevated spiritual beauty which we justly term Christian.

Many paths, old as well as new, must be tried and broken up before that certain road is laid open, in which renovated art may securely tread, and attaining the long-sought goal, bloom forth in high religious beauty.

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Source: I. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798), *Kritische Schriften*, edited by Wolfdietrich Rasch. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1958, pp. 37–38. Translation by Jonathan Skolnik; II. Friedrich Schlegel, *The Fundamentals of Gothic Architecture* (1803), in *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick von Schlegel: Comprising Letters on Christian Art, An Essay on Gothic Architecture, Remarks on the Romance-Poetry of the Middle Ages and on Shakspeare [sic], On the Limits of the Beautiful, On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. Translated from the German by E. J. Millington. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1849, pp. 155–56, 174–75, 182–83; III. Friedrich Schlegel, *Appeal to Painters of the Present Day* (1804), in *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick von Schlegel*, pp.143–46.

Source of original German texts: I. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäum-Fragmente* (1798), *Kritische Schriften*, edited by Wolfdietrich Rasch. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1958, pp. 37–38; II. Friedrich Schlegel, *Grundzüge der Gotischen Baukunst* (1803), *Kritische Schriften*, pp. 358–59, 378–79, 386–88; III. Friedrich Schlegel, *Aufforderung an die Maler der jetzigen Zeit* (1804), *Kritische Schriften*, pp. 406–09.

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