

**The Western aesthetic concept of the Sublime evolves as a result of the socio-politics of each era. This essay explores the philosophical changes and the shifting perceptions of Sublime theory.**

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## The Unknown Sublime

This essay demonstrates that Western aesthetic theories on The Sublime, and the art associated with it, have evolved in line with society's changing socio-political beliefs, especially religious and spiritual.<sup>1</sup> Definitions of The Sublime are wide and varied, with conflicting ideas of what constitutes Sublime. The study of sublime aesthetics is both a philosophical and etymological challenge. By following a Hegelian progression I argue that cognition of the unknown – the infinite, limitless and the abyss – is what produces feelings of 'awe' and 'terror' so associated with the Sublime.

The term *sublime* was first used in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD by Pseudo-Longinus to describe the intense feelings of joy and spiritual illumination gained from viewing beauty in Nature. However, up until the Eighteenth Century and the Age of Enlightenment, the Sublime was integrated into the wider aesthetic concept of Beauty. With belief in divine forces beyond human understanding, there had previously been no need to separate the two concepts; the Sublime was simply an aspect of Beauty. As rationalism and science blossomed and religious and spiritual thought waned, a separate term was needed to describe these intense feelings. Thus, to fully understand the Sublime, we need to also examine history of the aesthetics of Beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> Though aesthetic concepts are universal, existing in both ancient Eastern and Western cultures, this essay concentrates solely on Western aesthetic philosophies that start with Plato and culminate with Friedrich Nietzsche.

Idealist Plato (427 - 347 BC) was the first known philosopher to offer explanation of aesthetic experience.<sup>2</sup> For Plato beautiful objects were a mere reflection of Absolute or Ideal Beauty that resided in an unknowable realm of Essential Forms.<sup>3</sup> Absolute beauty was love and morality, and Absolute Knowledge 'The Good'.<sup>4</sup> Society believed in a higher realm beyond the reach of man where the Gods ruled. Plato's unknowable realm of Essential Forms mirrors this belief in powerful uncontrollable Gods that rule nature.<sup>5</sup> Keeping with the attitudes of his time, "Plato tried to solve logical problems by postulating metaphysical entities".<sup>6</sup> However his student Aristotle's (384 – 322 BC) was more pragmatic, believing that reality was empirical, able to be perceived on the human level, with material things on Earth sharing in this Ideal Beauty – the universal present in the particular. Aristotle defined beautiful objects by their symmetry, proportion and harmony.

Held in awe and fear, the Gods were central to both temple architecture and art where sacred geometry and statues with ideal Apollonian forms offered sublime inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly all Greek and later much early Roman art were vehicles to denote the Gods'

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<sup>2</sup> Earlier than Plato, Pythagoras found God in mathematics. The Parthenon was built on mathematics. See *Sublime Art References*, Plates 2 and 3, p 14.

<sup>3</sup> The Essential Forms were ideals, and, as with all creation, had been the work of the Demiurge, an all-powerful artisan that fashions and maintains the cosmos.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word *kalon* means both 'beauty' and 'good'; 'a person ascends from 'physical beauty to moral beauty, and from moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge'" – David E. Cooper, Editor, *Aesthetics: The Classic Readings*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford United Kingdom, 1977, p. 55

<sup>5</sup> At this time all nature was seen as the dominion of the Gods, from a stand of trees to surging oceans and the heavens above, with the Sun at its centre. Plato likened his ultimate knowledge of the Good to the Sun.

<sup>6</sup> Review, *Plato on Man and Society, Reviewed work: An examination of Plato's Doctrines* by I. M. Crombie, *The Classical Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Dec. 1963) pp 278-280

<sup>7</sup> Plato's philosophical investigations, particularly in relation to harmony, conformed to Pythagoreans.

perfect forms in their unseen world of Olympus.<sup>8</sup> Beauty was a product of the Gods, and thus the Sublime was integral to Beauty and to all things beautiful. Though Plato saw artworks as mere imitations (mimesis), Aristotle believed that the human soul had access to the Truth through art. For the ancients the Sublime was everywhere.

With the emergence of Christianity within the Roman Empire, neo-platonic philosophy evolved accordingly. Early Christians adapted the Essenes monotheistic and messianic beliefs, including reincarnation, to create a communal spirit of love and equality where slave and senator directly worshipped God and Christ side-by-side. This was fertile ground for Egyptian-born Plotinus (205 – 270 AD) to write the first dedicated essay on beauty, and thus make aesthetics a separate study of philosophy. As a young man he studied philosophy in Alexandria, an early centre of Coptic Christians.

A proponent of Plato, Plotinus referred to Plato's supreme knowledge of 'The Good' in decidedly monotheistic terms of 'The One'. He believed that God-given intelligence discerns truth directly about a World that was one living organism.<sup>9</sup> He held that the imaginative ability to be outside oneself, *ekstasis*, was the ultimate transcendent experience.<sup>10</sup> Here the Soul recognises Unity and celebrates this as beauty. For Plotinus beauty was an indefinable and sublime metaphysical experience based upon intellectual

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<sup>8</sup> The Greeks and Romans shared a common cosmogony, believing that cloud covered Mount Olympus in Thessaly was their seat of power. The Roman version of this polytheism was more mysterious yet more formal and structured, the Roman Gods having greater concern for honour than personal codes. They were also more war like than their Greek counterparts reflecting Roman military concerns. However Greek philosophy continued to rule Roman thought. See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plate 3, p 14.

<sup>9</sup> For Plotinus the One is indivisible and all encompassing – a World Soul that permeates the cosmos and animates all matter.

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus postulated in his six-part *Enneads* that it was "the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and its own possessions."

advancement and virtue. Like Plato, Plotinus viewed art as a poor imitation (*mimesis*) of divine beauty. Early Christians applied Judaic laws that forbade graven images, and thus their art often used only symbols for Divine inspiration.<sup>11</sup> Early Christian painting and carving did not depict the 'real' but a higher sublime realm.

Pseudo-Longinus, held to be a student of Plotinus and an advocate of Aristotle, is attributed with *The Divine Names*, the first treatise on the irresistible force and mastery of the Sublime.<sup>12</sup> For Longinus the sublime uplifts the soul, fills one with proud exaltation and joy, generates grand and inspiring ideas; it also impregnates one with heavenly powers, including the ability to speak oracles, leading one closer to God.<sup>13</sup> His work advocates that Beauty and God are inseparable, with all things moving toward Beauty and the Good, aspects of God.<sup>14</sup> The sublime permeates such aesthetics.

From 395 AD Imperial Rome metamorphosed into the Church of Rome<sup>15</sup>, adapting existing power structures to create church hierarchy and doctrine that maintained stability and control.<sup>16</sup> Also a Neo-Platonist, St. Augustine (354-430 AD) was the most influential Western philosopher of his era; he believed that beauty was unity, equality,

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<sup>11</sup> Within the Bible Exodus Chapter 20 representation is expressly prohibited - "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything ...". See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plate 4 and 5, p 14.

<sup>12</sup> There is debate on whether the six-part *Divine Names* was written by First Century writer Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC – after 7 BC), distinguished 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD Greek scholar Cassius Longinus (c. 213–273 AD) or some unknown author. If Dionysius the treatise would pre-date Christianity and Plotinus and this seems unlikely.

<sup>13</sup> Rod Gilbert & Juha Tolonen, *Photography and Landscape*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, USA, 2012, p.64.

<sup>14</sup> "Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things" – Pseudo-Longinus, *The Divine Names*, Chapter 704A. This adheres to the concept of Pankalia, relating to the book of *Genesis*, that 'the world is purposeful in its structure'.

<sup>15</sup> In 312 Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. By 395 Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, with two competing churches - the Orthodox in the East and Catholic in the West. The East denounced any images, whilst the West did not.

<sup>16</sup> See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plates 6 and 7, p. 15.

number, rhythm, proportion and order.<sup>17</sup> He saw art as purely symbolic of God's art (Nature), the universe revealing God through its beauty.<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine supplanted Plato's Sun with Light (illumine) as the symbol of divine energy, and this became central to future medieval religious thought.<sup>19</sup> Saint Augustine's aesthetics doctrine endured throughout medieval times, with the Church maintaining tight control over the minds and souls of its people.<sup>20</sup>

As laws on representation were slowly relaxed, saintly figures depicted with halos of light also symbolised the Divine.<sup>21</sup> Sublime art in the Middle Ages reached its zenith in cathedral building. The Basilica of St Denis was the first 'gothic' cathedral to be completed in 1144 AD and Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral in 1250 AD its finest example. Here the use of monumental space, extremely high vaulted ceilings and magnificent stain glass windows create an ethereal Light enhanced by religious narrative imagery and divine symbolism.<sup>22</sup> These immense structures were encyclopaedic, built using sacred geometry to guide, educate and illuminate all.<sup>23</sup> During

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<sup>17</sup> Plotinus in his essay the *Enneads* excludes symmetry as an element of beauty; St. Augustine re-introduced it, taking his beauty's three elements (proportion, symmetry and harmony) from Aristotle.

<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine believed that nature 'pleases because it is beautiful' and was purely a reflection of God's beauty. He separates, as did Plato, the realms of God and man, establishing a hierarchy for God's beauty and ordinary beauty; identifying music, architecture, painting and sculpture as purely imitations of God's Beauty.

<sup>19</sup> Light as a primary religious symbol dates to early antiquity, such as Ancient Egyptian sun worship (Amon-Ra) and Judaic religious beliefs of the 'light of God' symbolized by the eternal Temple flame.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Gregory the Great (540 - 604) stated that "The pictures in the church are there not to be adored but to instruct the minds of the ignorant ..." - Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art: From Plato to Winklemann*, Volume 1 of Theories of Art Series, Routledge Publishing, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2000, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Image representation was successively banned and sanctioned by the Roman Church during the 8th and 9th Centuries AD. Those who favoured imagery argued that through participation (*methexis*) veneration is transferred from the icon to the Divine. In 1025 the *Synod of Arras* determined that the icon is devotional rather than narrative, and "the simple and illiterate who cannot gaze upon the Crucifixion through the Scriptures may contemplate it through a picture". However there continued a belief by clergy, such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1153), that imagery can corrupt, seduce, mislead and distract.

<sup>22</sup> For information on Chartres Cathedral see *Sublime Art Reference*, Plates 8, 9 and 10, p 15.

<sup>23</sup> Abbot Suger (c.1081-1151) oversaw the building of St. Denis Basilica and believed that "the dull mind rises to the Truth through that which is material".

this period St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), esteemed church and political leader and member of the renowned Scholastics, in his *Summa Theologica* (1273) expounded that God guided all natural laws, integrating Neo-Platonism with Aristotelian theory of matter and form. Though Aquinas reinforced St. Augustine's doctrine that Beauty is an essential quality of God, he also offered a more rational and empirical definition of Beauty as perfection, harmony and radiance. Beauty, and with it the Sublime, was an obsession for the medieval mind.

Florence, ruled by the powerful merchant family Medici in the Fifteenth Century, was the cradle of Renaissance humanist thought. Here and throughout Italy Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) spearheaded a revival of Greek and Roman culture, promoting a Platonist belief that art was 'the correct imitation of Nature', with Nature an emanation of God.<sup>24</sup> Hence foremost in the Renaissance artist mind was perfecting the representation of Nature, as had been achieved by classical Greeks and Romans, to create an illusion of and window on reality.<sup>25</sup>

Artist genius Michelangelo, also a Neo-Platonist, believed that experience of beauty "makes one long for the ultimate origin" – such longing a Sublime experience.

Michelangelo believed that Beauty dwelled in the artist's mind. Artist, writer and historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) defined the addition of 'grace' as the element separating High Renaissance from its previous form, and that there could be no beauty without grace. Grace emanates from the soul and artists such as Leonardo da Vinci

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<sup>24</sup> Leon Battista Alberti was a true Renaissance man – a humanist author, artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher and cryptographer.

<sup>25</sup> Early Renaissance artists such as Italians Masaccio (1401-1428), Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455), Donatello (c1386-1466) and Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) perfected their skills of perspective and anatomy so they could imitate the highest realms of Nature so as to achieve the Sublime. See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plate 11 and 12, p 15.

(1452-1519), Michelangelo (1475-1564) and Raphael (1483-1520) were termed *genius* for their virtuosity in creating a sense of grace in their art. Grace now becomes a separate aesthetic quality that is associated with such artists' 'sublime' masterpieces.<sup>26</sup>

With increased education, wealth and internationalisation through trade, such ideas spread quickly throughout Europe. Particularly in northern Europe secular wealth and education soon lead to a questioning of Church authority and the religious Reformation. In the Seventeenth Century as knowledge and science expands, more and more natural forces understood, less and less beautiful objects are associated with Sublime experience. It had been the unknowable forces of life and the limitlessness of God inherent in Divine creation that sparked Sublime feelings. The term beauty became synonymous with any aesthetically pleasing object often without divine connotations. Art was often not religious in nature, with sublime experience frequently no longer present in art.<sup>27</sup>

The next major exploration of The Sublime was a result of the Age of Enlightenment, where scientific exploration and classification of the natural world was an integral part of an increasingly educated secular society. In 1757 Englishman Edmund Burke (1729-1797) first undertook a detailed discussion of the Sublime in his book *A philosophical Enquiry into The Origin of our ideas into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, describing the Sublime as "a state of the soul where all its motions are suspended with some degree of

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<sup>26</sup> See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plate 13 and 14, p 16.

<sup>27</sup> In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries Beauty and the Picturesque became the key aesthetics in art with art becoming more secular in terms of both subject matter and market. See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plates 17 and 18, p 16.



horror".<sup>28</sup> In it Burke classified those objects that by their very nature he thought sublime.<sup>29</sup> His was the Age of Reason, and Burke wished to rationally explain these powerful feelings of awe and terror when viewing nature's great and terrible objects<sup>30</sup>. He cites thoughts of Infinity as prime.<sup>31</sup> As part of aesthetic experience, sublime theory thus became separated from the wider aesthetics of beauty.

The upward social status of 'gentlemen' in pre-industrial England saw Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) announce in his 1757 aesthetics essay *Of the Standard of Taste* a person's judgement, based on breeding and education, was a key factor in discerning beauty. In line with Age of Enlightenment humanism, elitist Hume shifted the aesthetic emphasis from the object to the viewer, arguing that differences in taste might arise from differences in perception of beauty.

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<sup>28</sup> "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with the sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine affect and truest test of the sublime" Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into The Origin of our ideas into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, Oxford, United Kingdom, p 67.

<sup>29</sup> Edmond Burke named natural objects such as mountains, raging seas, endless oceans, the heavens and blackness of midnight etc. as objects of the Sublime. He also included man-made objects such as the Giza Pyramids and Stonehenge as sublime.

<sup>30</sup> It had been English philosophers and writers Anthony Ashley Cooper (1671-1713), John Dennis (1658 - 1734) and Joseph Addison (1672- 1719) who first brought the term Sublime to prominence again in the Eighteenth Century as a way of explaining their feelings of awe and fear as they visited the Swiss Alps on their Grand Tour, and such accounts must have influenced Edmond Burke. Anthony Dennis published an article *Miscellanies* in a 1693 journal describing his crossing of the Swiss Alps. In it he described a new feeling of beauty in nature that involved more than delight, a "pleasure to the eye as music is to the ear", but "mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair." This was an experience akin to Edmond Burke's later description of the Sublime.

<sup>31</sup> Edmond Burke's key aspects of the Sublime are: terror, obscurity (unknown darkness), immense power, privation (darkness, solitude and silence), vastness, infinity, succession and uniformity (the artificial infinite), magnitude (greatness of dimension in buildings) infinity in pleasing objects, great difficulty, magnificence (of the starry heavens and lightening), light (of the sun and in architecture) loudness and suddenness. – Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into The Origin of our ideas into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, Oxford, United Kingdom, pp. 67 –79.

Both Burke and Hume's enquiries strongly influenced eminent German philosopher Emanuel Kant (1724-1804).<sup>32</sup> Burke's indicator of irrepressible instinctive passions became Kant's evidence of man's capacity for reason,<sup>33</sup> whilst Kant further refined Hume's 'taste' into stages of perceiving and feeling Beauty. Kant's philosophy was seen as a 'Copernican revolution' where the mind gives order to the world, placing man at the epicentre of his own universe. For Kant the world has no structure other than what the mind gives it.

In discussing aesthetics Kant never mentions God; theology and philosophy are separated. Kant believed that aesthetic judgement was not cognitive, rather a 'free play' between understanding and imagination.<sup>34</sup> For Kant whilst Beauty was an experience of the measurable, the Sublime was an experience of limitlessness or formlessness in Nature. Whereas beauty was discernable through 'free play', the Sublime was beyond human senses, in the realm of the Supersensible, where human imagination strains to its limits and fails.

When facing objects of great magnitude or power, Kant believed that reason alone overrides human passions, allowing rationality without understanding and imagination. Kant postulated a 'mathematical sublime' when contemplating vast magnitudes such as infinity and the universe, and a dynamical sublime when viewing the awesome power of

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<sup>32</sup> Kant wrote three major philosophical works – *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the latter including *Aesthetic Judgments* and the four reflective aesthetics of the *agreeable*, the *beautiful*, the *sublime* and the *good*.

<sup>33</sup> Jerome Carroll, Author, *The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Spring) 2008, p. 171.

<sup>34</sup> Kant theorized that aesthetic judgment depended upon three criteria: our satisfaction in the beautiful is free and disinterested; our ability to recognize beauty is universal; the object is seen as appropriate for aesthetic contemplation – purposiveness; and if these three conditions are met then by necessity the object is seen as beautiful.

Nature such as volcano, hurricane or lightning. He postulated that the mathematical sublime offers a feeling of superiority of intellect, whilst the dynamical creates a sense of physical impotence, with rationality able to suppress fearful imaginings.

Kant also believed that morality, such as belief in the Divine, in humanity and the strength of our inner being, was a counterweight when experiencing the momentary fear or negation caused by viewing nature's power and vastness.<sup>35</sup> Kant saw Sublime experience as both pain and pleasure; beside fear of incomprehensible limitlessness and power the viewer experiences a sense of joy at recognising their untouchable inner, infinite universe. Promoting Enlightenment thought, Kant saw the sublime as an experience that reveals both 'reason' and 'humanity'.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) proposed that reality is purely a reflection of the human mind, and art the mind's attempt to progressively make sense of its world. Hegel's "sublime theory reads as a meditation on limits" believing that identity and meaning are generated purely by the operation of limits, and thus the abstractions of thought presented in Sublime theory are not plausible.<sup>36</sup> Hegel believed that art no longer spoke to the Soul; by no longer meeting our higher needs Hegel he concluded that art would be usurped by philosophy and religion.

In contrast German Idealist Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775 - 1854) championed high art for tapping an Absolute realm of collective consciousness; art

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<sup>35</sup> "Kant suggests that this (thinking of nature) makes us think that ideas and higher purposes of our inner nature, like freedom and morality, may be realised in outer nature and society." – Christian Helmet Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core concepts and Problems*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2005, p. 115.

<sup>36</sup> Jerome Carroll, Author, *The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Spring) 2008, pp. 174.

presents aesthetics of the Sublime via intense emotions of apprehension, horror, terror and awe.<sup>37</sup> It was German Idealists who inspired a whole generation of artistic romanticism at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. In a reaction to scientific rationalism and the alienation of Industrial Revolution artists such as Casper David Friedrich, J. W. Turner, William Wordsworth and John Martin instilled their art with this newfound Sublime, producing works of imagination that often involved depicting the awesome power and majesty of Nature.<sup>38</sup>

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) saw life as a futile search for satisfaction driven by a Darwinian Will to survive.<sup>39</sup> He believed that pure aesthetic contemplation offered the one respite from relentless suffering as it lifted both artist and viewer out of themselves, negating the self. In contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844 – 1900) 'life-affirmation' philosophy was far more positive; he affirmed life's realities over any ideas of a world beyond. Using classical Greek mythology as a metaphor he postulated that society had progressively favoured the civilised Apollonian energies of light, harmony and order over the chaotic Dionysian energies of the primordial and unknown. In other words, much to its detriment, Western society had chosen Beauty over the Sublime. Nietzsche believed that this obsession of society for order and rationalism had literally killed the concept of God, and thus the experience of the Sublime.

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<sup>37</sup> Idealism philosophy believed that art *could* present Emanuel Kant's unrepresentable – The Sublime. Idealists were closely linked with both Romanticism and the revolutionary politics of the Enlightenment.

<sup>38</sup> The Romantic Period in art, from approximately 1800 to 1850, saw works of pure imagination that presented the sublime power and majesty of Nature. Nature was seen as mentally and morally healthy. See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plates 19 and 20, p 17.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer key work *The World as Will and Representation*, 1818 foreshadows Charles Darwin's (1808-1882) book *On the Origins of Species*, 1858 in speaking about the Will in each individual's daily survival.

Nietzsche's prophetic thoughts have had a profound affect on Post Modernism. In recent years the Contemporary Sublime has supplanted Beauty as the constant subject in art. In today's art cognitive recognition precipitates "a loss of assured systems of meaning" and the viewer is given the opportunity of glimpsing beyond the prison of the self.<sup>40</sup> Much of this art rejects both God and humanism, articulating its own 'inhumanity'.<sup>41</sup>

No longer is the Sublime tied purely to ideas of Gods or the Divine, but simply to the limits of self and the unknowable beyond. Science is now the vanguard, peeling back the unknown in the search of meaning. Infinite cosmos, limitless quantum physics and the abyss of ever-present death offer today's great questions that instil fear and awe. However neither subject nor object are sublime, it is the interaction between them that ultimately determines Sublime experience.

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<sup>40</sup> Jerome Carroll, Author, *The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Spring) 2008, p. Excellent examples of art that employs the Contemporary Sublime are Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Cube*, 1966 and Yayoi Kusama, *Fireflies on the Water*, 2002 – See *Sublime Art Reference*, Plates 26 and 27, p 18.

<sup>41</sup> French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) believed that modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, stating that "around the name of the sublime modernity triumphed, not least over nature" – Rod Gilbert & Juha Tolonen, *Photography and Landscape*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, USA, 2012, p. 66.

# Sublime Art References

## Classical Greek & Roman

**Plate 1:** Unknown, *Artemision Zeus*, 460BC - 450BC, is a 2.09-metre high bronze statue dating from the Ancient Greek mid-classical period, depicting the perfect form of Zeus or Poseidon.



**Plate 2.** *The Parthenon*, 438 BC. Built on the Athenian Acropolis, dedicated to city-state patron Goddess Athena, the Parthenon was archaeoastronomically aligned to the Hyades using Pythagorean mathematics.



**Plate 3:** 120-50 BC Roman copy of Greek sculpture *Doryphoros* by Greek sculpture Polykleitos, 450-440 BC. This idealised sculpture depicts the Greek controposto stance that highlights Aristotelian symmetry, proportion and harmony.

## Early Christian



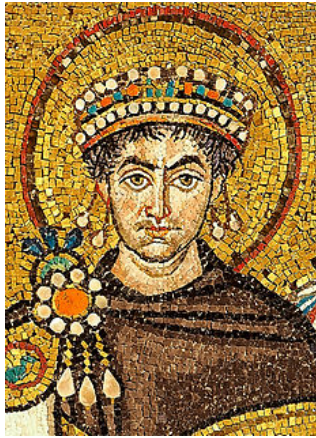
**Plates 4:** The Anchor, Fish and Chi-Rho symbols appear in the *Catacombs of St. Sebastian* Rome. The Anchor expresses the conviction of eternal life; the Fish relates to Christ and his apostles as fishermen of men; and the *Chi-Rho* is the first two Latin letters of the name of Christ. These symbols offered sublime contemplation.



**Plates 5:** Given Roman traditions, Judeo-Christians laws of 'no graven images' were not strictly adhered to, with some elaborate catacomb art depicting Old Testament stories, Christian worshippers, and Christ The Shepard and his Apostles.



## Byzantium and Medieval

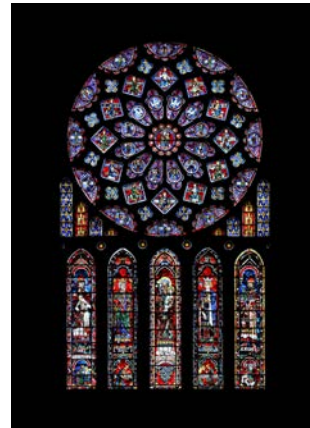


**Plate 6:** Detail of Mosaic, *Basilica San Vitale*, c. 547 AD, Ravenna, depicting Emperor Justinian 1 (527-565 AD), also known as Saint Justinian by the Eastern Church, with halo of light. This illustrates Christianity's adaption of earlier Roman Empire power structures.



**Plate 7:** *Madonna with the Large Eyes*, 1260 AD, was considered a miracle-working icon in the Cathedral of Siena. The Marion Cult first appeared in the Fourth Century AD, and grew to central prominence in later medieval times. The worship of the Madonna mirrored ancient Greek and Roman Goddess worship.

**Plate 8, 9 and 10:** *Chartres Cathedral* is the peak of High Gothic architecture, with its emphasis on illumination and education. Its ethereal use of light through its 3:1 height ratio and its many stain glass windows inspired Sublime feelings.

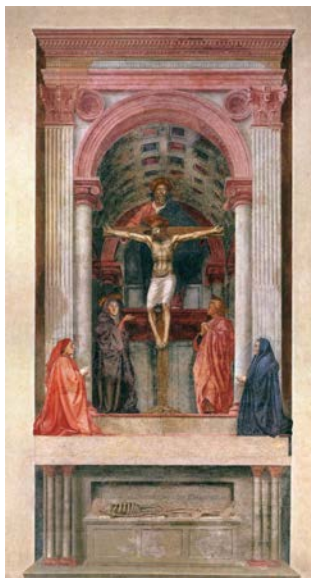


Chartres Cathedral's spectacular north transept rose window.



Central tympanum of the *Royal Portal* of Chartres Cathedral.

## Renaissance



**Plate 11:** Masaccio (1401-1428), *Holy Trinity*, fresco, Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1427-1428. This is an prime example of the introduction of naturalism within Early Renaissance art, with strong use of perspective, giving worshippers the feeling of awe from the illusion of actually being there.



**Plate 12:** Sandro Botticelli (c.1445-1510), *Primavera*, c. 1482, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Painted as a private commission for one of the Medici Family. The work illustrates the departure from Church doctrine to ancient classical themes of sublime Gods and spirits that occurred during the Renaissance.



## High Renaissance



**Plate 13:** Michelangelo (1475-1564), *The Creation of Adam*, Detail from the Sistine Chapel, 1508-1512, ceiling fresco, Vatican, Rome. The virtuosity of Michelangelo's work expresses the genius of the artist in creating truly inspirational work that inspires awe, and at that time, the fear of God.



**Plate 14:** Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), *Mona Lisa*, 1503 -1506, oil on popular, The Louvre Museum, Paris. Thought to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, this painting illustrates the addition of 'grace' that separated the High Renaissance from previous art forms.

## Baroque



**Plate 15:** Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Marble, 1647-52, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. This is Baroque art that attempted to stem the tide of the Protestant Reformation. This period of Counter-Reformation prescribed works of high emotion that offered sublime experiences in an attempt to win over the populace. However outside of Italy, particularly in Northern Europe, art was becoming increasingly secular.



**Plate 16:** Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, 1601.

## Rococo

**Plate 17:** Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), *The Swing*, c. 1767, Oil on canvas, Wallace Collection, London, United Kingdom. Unlike Baroque, Eighteenth Century Rococo was not concerned with religious matters. Art was designed for purchase by aristocratic society and the wealthy upper middle class, where freedom, good taste and pleasure were important in life.



**Plate 18:** Thomas Gainsborough, (1727-1788), *The Blue Boy*, oil on canvas, 1770, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



## Romanticism

**Plate 19:** Casper David Freidrich (1774-1840), *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany.

The Romantic artists such as Friedrich and Delacroix wished to create sublime experiences in their works, using big themes such as the majesty of nature, limitlessness, freedom and injustice.



**Plate 20:** Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, oil on canvas, The Louvre Museum, Paris.

## Modernism

Throughout Modernism there were multiple art movements that attempted to include the Sublime within their works. Malevich's Suprematism and Rothko's Abstract Expressionism were attempts in creating sublime experiences using abstraction and materiality of paint.

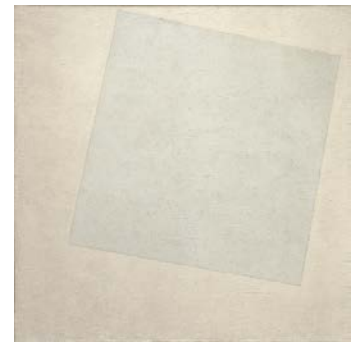


**Plate 21:** James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Nocturne: Blue and Silver - Cremorne Lights*, 1872, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London. An Impressionist painter Whistler uses everyday scenes to initiate feelings of the Sublime.



**Plate 23:** Ansell Adams (1902-1984), *Yosemite Valley Clearing Winter Storm* 1944, gelatin silver photograph.

**Plate 22:** Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879-1935), *White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York. He was a pioneer of geometric abstraction.



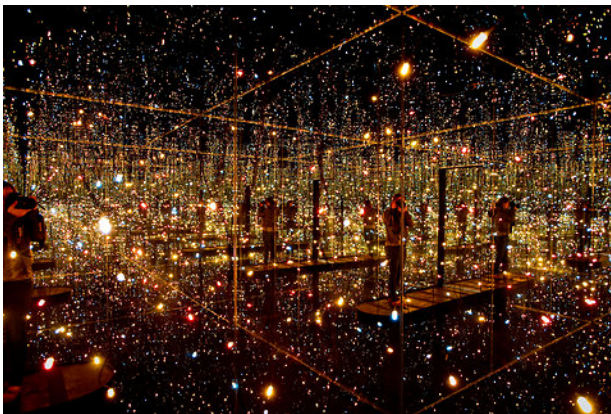
**Plate 24:** Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Orange, Red, Yellow*, 1961, acrylic on canvas, private collection. Rothko creates the ethereal by creating a chromatic afterimage.

## Post Modernism & Contemporary



**Plate 25:** Nancy Holt (1938-2014), *Sun Tunnels*, 1973-76, concrete tunnels, Great Basin Desert, Utah. Astronomical Land Art that is a return to the celebration of Nature of Romanticism in the early Nineteenth Century. Dealing with concepts of time and space, it is designed to take viewers outside of themselves, and to experience Sublime emotions.

**Plate 26:** Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1930), *Cubic Metre of Infinity*, 1966, mirror and rope, 120 x 120 x 120 cm, Private Collection. This is one of five different coloured versions. The internal mirrors of the Cube are unseeable; the Cube contains internal mirrors and symbols that repeat to Infinity. This is the Contemporary Sublime where the unseen is unknowable and the limits of human imagination are exceeded.



**Plate 27:** Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929), *Fireflies on the Water*, 2002. Mirror, plexiglass, 150 lights and water, 281.9 x 367 x 367 cms, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Fireflies on the Water* is romanticism through technology. Kusama plays on the juxtaposition of limitlessness and confined space. Visitors enter this small room alone and experience a limitless perspective. Kusama is highlighting that the sublime moves from nature to the man-made world/culture.

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