

Class 1 : Introspection, Exploration

A. The Gift of Age

1. Main title 1 (*Rembrandt Self-Portrait*)

I have added another word to my original title, EXPLORATION. It is now INTROSPECTION, EXPLORATION, as examples of the two most common postures of artists nearing the end of their careers: looking inside themselves, and looking out to something new, experimental, rule-breaking. Sometimes both at once. In this first class, let's survey the ground to get a sense of what I will—and will not—be talking about in the rest of the course. Starting with a video I made a couple of years ago, called *Rembrandt's Eyes*. It is a series of portraits by **Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn** (1606–69) made between the ages of 23 and 63, faded into one another, with the only constant being the searching gaze of those eyes; the music is Dutch from around the same time.

2. Video: *Rembrandt's Eyes*

3. Rembrandt: *Self-Portrait at 63* (1669, Hague Mauritshuis)

What did you notice? The progressive aging, of course. But I am calling this section “The *Gift of Age*,” not the “ravages.” Along with the obvious signs of increasing years, there is also a greater boldness in the handling of the paint and with it, an increased depth of perception, a sense of interiority, an inner glow. Rembrandt was only 63 when he died; he is actually one of the least long-lived of the artists we shall be studying. But nonetheless, historians point to the freedom and luminance of his later works and see these as fingerprints not only of *his* late style, but the phenomenon of *LateStyle* in general.

4. Edward Said and Theodor Adorno

[A parenthesis on that term **LateStyle**. I write it as one word because I don't just to use it to describe the literal *late style* of a particular artist, but as a phenomenon and an adjective to describe it. My one-word portmanteau is in homage to the German philosopher and musicologist **Theodor W. Adorno** (1903–69), who coined the term **Spätstil** in reference to Beethoven. In English, however, the main book on the subject is *On Late Style* by the Palestinian author **Edward Said** (1935–2003), a collection of brilliant but disconnected chapters for a book that he never lived long enough to write, based on a famous course he taught at Columbia. It is a stimulating book, and you will get many half-digested pieces of it over the next six weeks. But the only times that Said is difficult to read are those sections in which he talks about Adorno, who he says is absolutely impossible!]

5. Rembrandt: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (engraving, 1636)

6. Rembrandt: *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c.1669, St. Petersburg, Hermitage)

7. — both images together

Here is a comparison I have shown before, but it will demonstrate Rembrandt's late style in something other than a self-portrait. Here are two versions of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, an illustration to Jesus' parable about the young man who spends all his inheritance until he is reduced to living in a pigsty, but then returns to his father, who welcomes him back into the family—a parable of God's willingness to forgive sinners who truly repent. The etching is from 1636; the oil is one of his last works, from 1669; over three decades between them—what has changed? There is that extraordinary effect of light glowing through the darkness, for one. There is the same free handling of paint you saw in the last *Self-Portrait*. And a significant change in viewpoint: the etching is sideways on, an objective telling of the story, turning it round by 90 degrees makes it *subjective* instead, whether you identify with the father or the son.

8. Rembrandt: *Simeon in the Temple* (unfinished, 1669, Stockholm)

Although Rembrandt himself was younger, I think his identification was with the father. This is certainly the case in his *Simeon in the Temple*, an even later work because it is unfinished.

B. Last Works, Late Works

9. Section title (last works of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo)

This slide shows the last (or last-ish) works by each of the great triumvirate of the High Renaissance in Florence and Rome: **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519), **Raphael** (Raffaello Santi, 1483–1520), and **Michelangelo** (Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475–1574). They were respectively 67, 37, and 88 when they died, so not all of these exhibit *LateStyle* characteristics, but the differences are instructive.

10. Raphael: *The Transfiguration* (1520, Vatican), with Bellini (1480, Naples)

11. — upper portion of the above

Let's start with the youngest of them, Raphael. When he died unexpectedly of the fever in 1520, the almost-finished painting on his easel was *The Transfiguration*, an episode from the Gospels where Jesus ascends a mountain with three of his disciples, and is visited by the spirits of Moses and Elijah, all three glowing with an incandescent light. Now this quality of incandescence is something we will see a lot in *LateStyle* paintings, as we did with Rembrandt, but here it is built into the subject. Though if you compare Raphael's version with previous ones such as this by **Giovanni Bellini** (c.1430–1516), you will see three innovations: the brightness of the light, the raising of Jesus into the air so this now looks very much like the later episode of his *Ascension*, and the contrast with the quite separate episode of the inability of the disciples below to heal a boy possessed by demons. Unlike, say, **John Keats** (1795–1821), who knew he was going to die, and spoke of time since his diagnosis with consumption as "my posthumous existence," Raphael did not know he was going to die, so although this is certainly his *last* work, there is no justification other than sentiment for calling it a *late* one.

12. *The Death of Raphael* by Henry Nelson O'Neill (1866) and Carl Thiel (c.1870)

Yet there was sentiment going around in plenty. The biographer **Giorgio Vasari** (1511–74) made a great deal of this being Raphael's "final testament," and raised the painting to almost mythic status. And generations of Raphael worshippers, such as the two Victorians shown here, have gone along with it. Apparently, the painting was on the easel above his death-bed, and the similarity to Jesus' ascension into heaven was too good to resist for art-lovers who already considered Raphael to be a saint! **Carel Blotkamp**, the author of the other book I have been relying on heavily, *The End: Artists' Late and Last Works*, has a fascinating chapter on the whole Raphael phenomenon. But this is *not* what I'll be addressing in the rest of this course.

13. *Leonardo da Vinci: Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* (1501–19, Paris Louvre)

Leonardo da Vinci died in 1519, a year before Raphael, but he was 30 years older and in ill-health. This *Madonna* is one of his last paintings, even though he started it 18 years earlier! Like the *Mona Lisa*, it is unfinished, at least in the sense of never leaving his studio to be sent to the clients, though it is hard to see what more he could have done. But what fascinates me is the icy mountain background in several of these late paintings, which suggests an almost apocalyptic vision. Apparently, Leonardo became partially paralysed a few years before the end, which prevented him from standing to paint. But he could still sit down and draw, presumably with his left hand. And some of his last works take this apocalyptic vision a lot further. Here is one:

14. *Leonardo da Vinci: Deluge; Vision of the End of the World*

15. — the same, with text

Now living in France as the guest of **King François I** (he would have had to have crossed the Alps), Leonardo drew a series of 11 *Deluges*, ostensibly as part of a treatise on painting, but reading like a vision of the end of the world. Both this visionary quality and a style that breaks all the norms of form and clarity can be counted as *LateStyle* attributes. We will meet similar things again.

16. *Michelangelo: Bandini Pietà* (1555) and *Rondanini Pietà* (1564)

Michelangelo lived to 88, so one can truly talk of a late style. And nothing could be later than the group on the right, a sculpture that he intended for his own tomb, but never finished. It is a *Pietà*, or depiction of the body of Christ after being taken down from the Cross. This one, called the *Rondanini Pietà* after the family who first owned it, could in fact not be finished, for in whittling down the figures to their deepest essence, Michelangelo did not leave enough stone to hold the whole together. The extreme proportions, the unfinished quality, and the sense of spirituality can all be listed as *LateStyle* features. Traditionally, like his earlier *Pietà* in St. Peter's, this would represent Jesus with the Virgin Mary. But it is very hard to tell the sex of this figure, and I wonder if the similarity to the figure of Nicodemus in the earlier *Bandini Pietà* on the left—Michelangelo's own self-portrait—is merely accidental?

17. *Titian: Allegory of Prudence* (1565–70, London NG)

There is one more High Renaissance artist I might mention more than any of the other three, but didn't because he is Venetian rather than Florentine or Roman. This is **Titian** (Tiziano Veccellio, c.1485–1576), who lived to be around 90 (nobody is quite sure of his birthdate). And he very definitely exhibited a late style of extreme contrasts of light and shade, what **Vasari** called "painting in patches." I'll give you an example of it in a moment. But first another late work, not at the very end, but a kind of allegorical meditation on aging. A lot has been written on what it might mean, but we can be sure of one thing: it shows three faces: one old, one in full maturity, and the third young. It has been supposed that they show **Titian himself**, his son **Orazio**, and his nephew **Marco**—but this has also been questioned. The three animals (wolf, lion, and dog) are apparently associated with the three ages in classical sources, and there is an agreement that the three poses imply the past (looking back), the present (looking out), and the future (looking forward). The Latin inscription reads "from the experience of the past, the present acts prudently, lest it spoil future actions," but you can make of it what you will. Anyway it should be no surprise that meditation on age and the passing of time is a common *LateStyle* feature; we all do it!

18. Titian: *The Crowning with Thorns* (1543 Louvre and 1576 Vienna)

Here is one of those comparisons that are a gift to teachers of art history! In 1543, at the age of about 58, Titian painted the *Crowning with Thorns* on the left, now in the Louvre. In the last year of his life, at 88 or older, he painted the one on the right, now in Vienna. What are the differences?

C. Visions of Darkness, Visions of Light

19. Section title (Goya and Turner)

We jump now to two artists of the 19th Century, **Goya** and **Turner**, both of whom exhibited *LateStyle* characteristics but in diametrically opposite ways, and came to them by distinctly different routes.

20. Goya: *The Harvest* (1786) and *Witches' Sabbath* (1798)

Here are two late 18th-century paintings by **Goya** (**Francisco de Goya y Lucientes**, 1746–1828). In his service as court painter, he was responsible, among other things, for making designs for the Royal Tapestry Works, and *The Harvest* on the left is in a similar style, a pleasant *rococo pastorale*. The *Witches' Sabbath* on the right, painted twelve years later, is a shift, but not a seismic one. It was part of a commission by the **Duchess of Osuna**, who collected things having to do with witchcraft; it is still a quite playful treatment of the subject. But the *Witches' Sabbath* he painted between 1819 and 1823 is a seismic shift, and one of the clearest examples of sudden-onset *LateStyle* in the history of art.

21. Goya: *Witches' Sabbath* (1819–23, Madrid Prado).

In Goya's case, we can find reasons for it. Sometime in the 1790s, he contracted a viral illness that made him go deaf, eventually leaving him totally isolated from the court world in which he had thrived. Financially, though, he could afford to be; he now had enough money to build himself a house outside

Madrid, which he called *La quinta del sordo*, the deaf man's house. These late paintings, the so-called **Black Paintings**, were executed for himself alone, all painted on a black background directly on the plaster walls of the house. And there was plenty going on in Spain at the time to make him angry and acerbic: a takeover by Napoleonic forces, the Peninsula War, famine, and the repressive policies of the restored monarchy. Goya was not much interested in grand politics, but he was horrified by the individual cruelties and what would now be called "collateral damage." Here are two of the many plates from his etching series *The Disasters of War* which he produced between 1810 and 1820.

22. Goya: plates from *The Disasters of War* (1810–20)

These etchings were not published in Goya's lifetime, either. Goya essentially spent his last years working only for himself, producing etchings that could not be sold, and covering the walls of his house with paintings that none but he would see. It is a perfect example of *LateStyle*, and one of the most nightmarish and terrifying.

23. Goya: *Saturn and other "black paintings"* (–1823, Prado)

24. Goya: *Pilgrimage to San Isidoro* (–1823, Prado)

If Goya ended with Visions of Darkness, the last paintings of **JMW Turner** (1775–1851) were surely Visions of Light. Look at this one, *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, from 1846, near the end of the artist's career. He would have been 71. *LateStyle*, surely, but it could scarcely be more different from Goya.

25. Turner: *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846, London Tate)

26. — the same with details

What is going on? Something apocalyptic, surely, but in a good way: perhaps the resurrection at the last trumpet? Yet if you look closely (and frankly, consult a handbook), you will see all sorts of gruesome things happening in the corners: Adam and Eve mourning over Abel slain by Cain, a fleeing skeleton, Judith beheading Holofernes, and those ominous black birds. Turner exhibited it with the subtitle, "The feast of vultures when the day is done." So he is being every bit as pessimistic as Goya was; it is just that he does everything in a brighter key.

27. Turner: *Norham Castle, Moonrise* (1836) and *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (1845)

Perhaps I can make my case another way. Throughout his life, Turner had always painted landscapes, selling the paintings and then making even more money off the prints. Here are two versions of *Norham Castle* in Northern England, ten years apart. The one is as concrete as anything: a solid castle on a solid cliff, fishermen on the water hauling their nets. The other is just a few washes of paint, a floating vision, a symphony in light. Point made, right? Turner entering his *LateStyle* phase, painting pictures that even the French Impressionists would not catch up with for thirty years.

28. Turner: *Stormy Sea with Dolphins* (1835, London Tate)

Except that it doesn't work that way. Turner had been dissolving forms in light from the middle of his career on. Here is a seascape from a year *before* the solid version of the castle—and not just a sketch;

these were paintings intended for public exhibition. And I could give you examples from as early as 1830. So does this mean that Turner did not have a late style? No; I think he did; certainly the loosening of form, break with convention, and absorption in a personal vision are all *LateStyle* fingerprints. Yet they developed gradually, alongside his more conventional painting; they were not a distinct shift, as with Goya. And Turner is at his greatest, I think, in the half-dozen or so of his later paintings in which he managed to combine the abstract and the concrete.

29. Turner: *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway* (1844, London NG)

D. To Autumn

30. Section title (Joseph Severn: *John Keats*, 1821)

I'll end this hour with *To Autumn*, the last great ode of **John Keats** (1795–1821), written in 1819. I admit, there is nothing about it to suggest *LateStyle*; it is as firmly constructed as the best of his earlier poems, and it may *be* the best. Perhaps in reading it as the poet's farewell to life, I am as guilty of 20/20 hindsight as any of the worshippers who saw something transcendent in Raphael's *Transfiguration*. But Raphael didn't know he was going to die; Keats did. Shortly after this poem was written, he coughed up blood, and immediately knew what that meant. When his friend **Joseph Severn** (1793–1879, the painter of this portrait) refused to procure him opium, he complained, "How long is this posthumous existence of mine to go on?" He wrote no more major work after that, but it is impossible not to see *To Autumn* as the work of a man who knew—or suspected—that he did not have long to live. And seen in this way, it is an astonishingly brave and beautiful poem. The reader is **Matthew Coulton**.

31. Keats: *To Autumn*

32. Main title 2 (Keats in the woods)

E. An Expanded Vision

33. Section title (Yeats and Beethoven)

One of the most frequent aspect of *LateStyle* work is an expanded vision on the part of the artist, who now sees the immediate detail as part of a vaster world, or the fleeting moment as part of the long march of time. We saw this in Leonardo and Goya; it was implied in Keats; and even Turner's modern locomotive is portrayed in the midst of elements that shear and turn in their own vast rhythm. In this second hour, we shall look at two artists in different fields whose later work shows a similar scale of vision: **William Butler Yeats** (1865–1939) and **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827). They look quite different, don't they, the avuncular poet and the uncompromising composer. But even when young, Yeats could be quite adventurous, and Beethoven retained his sense of humor to the end.

34. Yeats title slide

I am going to play two poems in which Yeats faces aging and death. The first, *Sailing to Byzantium*, comes from 1927, when he was 62. The second, *Under Ben Bulbin*, is dated 1938, but he was dictating revisions to it on his deathbed in 1939, when he was 73. Let's start with the earlier poem. I include the short spoken introduction by the reader, **Dermot Crowley**, in which he describes why the poem is so important to him.

35. Yeats: *Sailing to Byzantium*, read by Dermot Crowley

36. Byzantium

So what is this about? Yeats is facing the sense of being out of tune with the country around him, not only on account of his age, but also its neglect of the old values. So he travels in the imagination to a distant land, an earlier faith, and a purer art. This is short enough for us to discuss its meaning stanza-by-stanza, if you like.

37. Yeats: *Sailing to Byzantium*, stanzas 1 and 2

38. Yeats: *Sailing to Byzantium*, stanzas 3 and 4

Yeats is simultaneously turning inwards, with his concern for his own art, and outwards in his historical and geographical reach. Both these are common *LateStyle* traits. And we will see them both again in his final poem, *Under Ben Bulbin*, which is written from the perspective of one already dead—another *LateStyle* fingerprint.

39. Ben Bulbin, County Sligo

The poem is too long to dissect in any detail, but I put a bunch of notes on the website. For now, though, you can at least enjoy some splendid images of the West of Ireland, the magnificent voice of Michael Macliammoir, and the words which I will put up as subtitles.

40. Yeats: *Under Ben Bulbin*, read by Michael Macliammoir

41. Yeat's grave

Those last three lines were indeed placed on Yeat's grave.

F. Breaking the Mold

42. Section title (Breaking the Mold)

Even in Beethoven's lifetime (1770–1827), people were dividing his work into three periods (early, middle, and late) and some version of this classification has stuck ever since. And as we have heard, **Teodor Adorno** based his whole concept of *Spätstil* on Beethoven's last works.

43. Works of the Last Period

Works of what is generally considered as Beethoven's last period include his last set of Piano Sonatas (1810–22), the Ninth (Choral) Symphony (1822), the *Missa Solemnis* (1823), and the last five String Quartets (1825–26). Above all, they are characterized by the freedom they take for the expected forms—that a symphony, sonata, or quartet will have four movements, each with a generally understood formal shape. I hope to demonstrate this by looking briefly at the Ninth Symphony and two of the late Quartets. But I also want to make another point: that Beethoven increasingly uses music as **dialectic**, to advance an argument, rather than merely for entertainment.

44. Choral Symphony covers

You just need to look at the covers to see how later generations have viewed the Ninth Symphony: massive, granitic, godlike. And indeed, if Beethoven had written only three movements and left it uncompleted, like Schubert, it would still be a work whose scale and complexity breaks the molds. But he added a fourth movement, and for the first time in symphonic history was not content merely with an orchestra, but added a chorus and four solo voices, to proclaim a hymn of international brotherhood written by **Friedrich Schiller** (1788–1805); talk about expanded vision! But equally surprising is the way the Beethoven gets into it, using the lower strings to deliver a recitative almost like an opera singer, considering the themes from each of the first three movements, then rejecting them one by one. Beethoven replaces this by a new theme, played by the orchestra alone. But even that is not enough. The baritone soloist breaks in to call for a new song, a song of joy (*Freude*), and the chorus repeats his cries of *Freude!* until finally the orchestral theme is linked to Schiller's words in the *Hymn to Joy* we all know. *Essentially, Beethoven is using his music to conduct an argument about what music should be.* Let's watch a performance from Chicago conducted by Riccardo Muti. I am taking the recitative that Beethoven gives to the basses and treating it as an actual dialogue, complete with supertitles!

~~45. Beethoven: Ninth Symphony, samples of movements 1–3 (may omit)~~

46. Beethoven: Ninth Symphony, opening of fourth movement

47. Title: the late quartets

The Ninth Symphony comes near the beginning of Beethoven's late period; his final five quartets (Opp. 127, 130, 131, 132, and 135) come at the very end of it. All of them are quite unusual. The standard form for a quartet, as for a symphony, is four movements, but the first three of this group have 5, 6, and 7 movements respectively! The greatest of the set is probably Opus 131, but Opus 135 is Beethoven's last full-length work. I want to play you the closing movement complete, but if there is time, I'll preface it by two brief glimpses of Opus 131. First, one of those extra movements, the **third**, made up of gestures and fragments, then turning into an impassioned *cadenza* for the first violin, leading into another extra movement, the **fourth**, a gentle *pastorale*, again composed of fragments traded between the four instruments. The third movement is another example of Beethoven's **dialectic**, and the fragmentation is a *LateStyle* feature that we have seen in painting and sculpture as well. The players are the **American String Quartet**.

48. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op.131*, third and opening of fourth movements

49. The American String Quartet

Next the **sixth** movement, a *scherzo*. Beethoven has *scherzi* (Italian for “joke”) in most of his later symphonic works, but those in the late Quartets tend to take on a feverish, hysterical quality that is also a feature of his late style. At first, this one seems as fragmentary as the movement we have just heard, continually stopping to ask itself if it is doing the right thing, but then it gathers momentum, and we hear an almost insultingly simple tune, first in the violins, then in the lower instruments. At that point it begins to break up again, and we shall stop.

50. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op.131*, opening of sixth movement

51. The Ariel String Quartet

A group now of younger players, originally from Israel, the **Ariel String Quartet**. They are going to give us a complete movement, the last movement of the **last quartet, Opus 135**. It is another example of Beethoven’s dialectic, this time dealing with death itself.

52. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op. 135*, opening of fourth movement (score)

And this time, he makes his meaning explicit, calling the movement “The Difficult Resolution” and labeling his two themes as question and answer: “Must it be?” and “It must be!” The answer is a joyous one, and though the question will come back in the middle section, Beethoven caps it with another of those almost insultingly simple tunes; I am calling it a **street song** in my annotations. This time, I don’t get a sense of hysteria, merely a jaunty whistle in the face of death. *LateStyle* need not always be doom and gloom; it can be transcendent too.

53. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op. 135*, fourth movement complete

54. Main title 3 (Beethoven’s grave)