

**Sublime: an aesthetic element in Art**Man Bahadur Gurung^{#*}[#]Teacher of Painting at Lalitkala Campus, Tribhuvan University.^{*}Corresponding Author: man.gurung@lc.tu.edu.np**Citation:** Gurung, M. B. (2025). Sublime: an aesthetic element in Art. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 7(1). 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v7i1.90773>**Abstract**

Sublime is an aesthetic element widely incorporated in art. The element arouses an aesthetic experience, mixed with both fear and awe. The concept of the sublime as an aesthetic element was primarily brought forward by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in the 18th century. Its presence in art has remained visible throughout history. The aesthetic experience of the sublime in art is present in the ancient cave paintings and Egyptian artifacts. They are found in the artworks of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The Romanticists ventured into the wilderness to experience sublimity to express it in their artworks. The Abstract Expressionists took the idea of the sublime and made it their principal objective in art creation. Today, the sublime has become an essential aesthetic element in art. This research article, based on a qualitative research method, aims to explore the aesthetic application of the sublime in art, relying on both primary and secondary sources of data.

Keywords

Aesthetic element, judgment of sublime, sublime in art.

Introduction

Art in general is the outer expression of our inner thoughts. Art has the power to captivate human emotion. To achieve that goal, elements of art need to be used in a specific manner. A successful work of art consists of aesthetic elements. Among these, the sublime is one of the aesthetic elements present in art, resulting in aesthetic experience.

Art plays the role of communication. Throughout history, art has been used to express different aspects of human vision, imagination, and emotion. In the Stone Age, art was used for hunting purposes. The Egyptian art focused on divinity and spirituality. Classical, Renaissance, and Neoclassical art strived for humanism. Medieval art followed the aspect of magical and mystical. The Rococo were seeking beauty and pleasure in their arts. There followed other aspects of the art by other art movements and trends. Some thought art should be beautiful, while others thought art should be moral. In any of these cases, art is made of a unique combination of fundamental components, which keeps it unique and alive.

Art can arouse beauty, but it can arouse the sublime as well. Beauty stirs love, while the sublime stirs esteem (Frierson, & Guyer, 2011). The impact produced by beauty is short-lived, whereas the impact produced by the sublime lasts forever (Krebaum, 2016). Artists strive to create the sublime in their artworks to produce this dynamic effect. We can experience the sublime in works of art. Sublime as an aesthetic element has been used in art for centuries.

We can experience the sublime when looking at ancient cave paintings. The gigantic pyramids and Egyptian sculptures overwhelm our aesthetic experience. Artworks from the Romanticism period aimed to induce sublime feelings into the viewer. The Abstract Expressionist artworks evoked the sublime. The experience of the sublime as an aesthetic element can be felt in the works of global contemporary artists today. Artists such as Anish



Kapoor, Ai Weiwei, Claes Oldenburg, and David Hockney are working on artworks that engulf the spectator.

Methods and Materials

This research article has been conducted using a qualitative method. The article is descriptive. The library method has been used to find proper documentation. The research has been carried out using primary and secondary sources of data. Books, journal articles, and web portals have been used for the data. The research aims to focus on the sublime as an aesthetic element in art, employing Burke and Kant's theory on the subject.

Sublime

The concept of the sublime was found far back in the days of the Renaissance. Having said that, the aesthetic significance of it was not fully appreciated until the 18th century. Edmund Burke wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the first major work on the sublime in 1757 (Krebaum, 2016; The Art Story, n.d.). He divided feelings into pleasurable, beautiful, and sublime. According to him, pleasure was not as strong a feeling as pain, and proposed that the sublime, which he understood to be our strongest passion, was rooted in fear, particularly the terror brought on by the fear of death (The Art Story, n.d.). Before his publication, the sublime and beauty were conceived as a single aesthetic experience, producing a pleasurable experience.

Sublime carries the mixed feelings of pleasure and fear. Burke finds terror as the ruling principle of the sublime (as cited in Krebaum, 2016, p. 78). The experience of the sublime moves the viewer. Because the feeling is both pleasing and terrifying. The reaction consists of both pain and pleasure. Pain is connected to fear, pleasure is connected to awe; the combination of the two feelings makes what Burke refers to as astonishment (Krebaum, 2016, p. 78). The overwhelming feeling of fear and pleasure, caused by the experience of the sublime, creates the feeling of awe. Instead of satisfying one's curiosity, the sublime intensifies it. Viewers feel astonishment because they are only facing the idea of threat, or the idea of something terrifying.

Immanuel Kant published *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in 1790, where he talked about *Judgment of Sublime* under *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Here, he divided the sublime into two types: Mathematical Sublime and Dynamic Sublime. The mathematical sublime is the power of the imagination concerning the infinite (National Gallery of Ireland, n.d.). It is limitless in magnitude, thus allowing us to conceive the idea of infinity. The mathematical representation of the immeasurable magnitude of the universe, metaphysical considerations of eternity, of providence, and of the immortality of our soul contain a certain sublimity and dignity (Frierson, & Guyer, 2011, p. 22). View of the Milky Way during a clear night sky, trekking to the Everest base camp surrounded by the Himalayas, hiking up to the Pun Hill during the rhododendron flowering season, or to Manung Kot to see the mountain range and clouds hovering below, propels the mathematical sublime.

The dynamic sublime is intensive in force and power. It is limitless in power. There is pleasure gained from speculation because the viewer is not in immediate danger. It is the ability to overcome the feeling of fear that we get from seeing something that is potentially dangerous, but poses no current threat (National Gallery of Ireland, n.d.). Experience of the rollercoaster ride, bungee jumping, sky diving, looking at the volcanic eruption from a safe distance, scuba diving, space travelling, witnessing natural phenomena like landslide, flooding, hurricane, cyclone, tsunami, asteroid landing, are a few examples where one can experience dynamic sublime.

Sublime as an aesthetic element in Art

Sublime can be experienced in both natural and man-made objects. The sublime experience in art is fundamentally transformative. Beauty creates a pleasurable experience, but the sublime results in a mixture of pleasure and fear. Sublime in its purest state results through magnitude, force, and quantity, which exceeds what imaginative thought can grasp at once. Sublime in art seizes, strikes, and makes one feel. This can be felt in the works of ancient Egyptian pyramids and monumental sculptures (Fig. 1). Although the sublime can be felt by looking at the ancient cave paintings, we cannot be sure if they intended to do so.



Fig. 1 *Pyramids and The Great Sphinx*

According to Wilson (1951), pyramids were the eternal home of their god-king, who was worthy of their supreme efforts in time, in materials, in manpower, and in craftsmanship (p. 69). Egyptian pyramids are massive in size and number. Seeing these gigantic artistic architectural marvels in the middle of the desert, one cannot just admire their enormity but get engulfed in awe and astonishment. Their monumental sculptures also project sublimity by avoiding the appearance of flexibility, momentary action, or passing emotion, and by standing massive and motionless (Wilson, 1951, p. 53). These ancient Egyptians were able to create a mark of their own on the planet, leaving generations of people in awe and wonder at their feats. These artifacts of their sublime vision stood there more than a thousand years ahead of similar thinking by the Greeks (Wilson, 1951, p. 124). Their vision of the sublime was towards eternity, while the Greeks were looking towards reasoning.



Fig. 2 Artist's imaginative rendition of *Colossus of Rhode*

The seven wonders of the ancient world, like: Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Temple of Artemis, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Colossus of Rhodes (Fig. 2), The Lighthouse of Alexandria, including the Great Pyramid of Giza, were all massive in their sheer size, producing a sublime notion (Rosenberg, 2019). Most of these

ancient artifacts failed to survive the earthquake and volcanic eruption. According to Lavater, "Among the works of art, the first rank has always been assigned to the Greek statues of the refined ages of antiquity: art has never produced anything more sublime, or more perfect. This is a truth generally admitted" (as quoted in Irwin, 1972, p. 26). Today, we find ruins of Greek sculptures, or their replica by the Romans in museums, still astounding our thoughts of the feats they were able to achieve in ancient times.

Religious artworks during the medieval period were able to incite the sublime feeling of divinity in the viewers. Kant touched on the divine and its connection to the sublime in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Smith, 2020, p. 52). According to Annette Wilke (2018), Bhakti Rasa "embodied by worship, hearing God's stories, repeating his holy name, and singing songs of praise, such gestures of devotion were seen as direct participation in the religious sublime" (p. 81). Religious artworks arouse the sublime feeling of pleasure and fear by the feeling of belongingness in the realm of the ideal world, feelings of submissiveness to God, a sensory vision of heaven, and fear of God, as well as hell.



Fig. 3 Michelangelo *the Last Judgment* (1536-41)

Sublime can be felt in the works of the Renaissance artists. Gigantic murals such as *The School of Athens* (200 in. x 300 in.) by Raphael, *The Last Judgment* (539.3 in. x 472.4 in.) (Fig. 3) by Michelangelo, and his Sistine Chapel ceiling paintings project a sense of infinity, overwhelming viewers' expectations. Also, the illusion of painted figures trying to step out of the two-dimensional canvas frame in the works of these artists creates a sense of fear and excitement in the viewer.

Sublime as an aesthetic concept formally took hold in artworks only after the 18th century. Burke and Kant published their works on *Sublime* in 1757 and 1790, respectively. The concept of the sublime was fully realized for the first time in the artworks of the Romanticist painters. The romanticists gave importance to their imaginative power with their handling of loose brushwork and colors. They ventured out to the wild in order to experience the sublime feeling themselves, and then came back to their studios and portrayed their experiences on canvases in a grand manner to evoke the sublime.



Fig. 4 Casper David Friedrich *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10)

In the artwork (Fig. 4) *Monk by the Sea* by German artist Casper David Friedrich, a minuscule and lonely figure of a monk can be seen standing in front of a vast, dark, and powerful sea, flecked with white clouds suggesting the threat of an incoming storm. According to Rory Wallace (1994), "A storm is not itself sublime; it is vast, it is obscure, it is sudden. These qualities fill us with terror, therefore we consider the storm sublime" (p. 105). Here, the viewer's focus hardly goes on to the human figure standing in the foreground, but scatters around the four corners of the canvas. The minuscule human figure looks powerless and completely overwhelmed by the enormity of nature. Although the industrial revolution of the 18th-century Europe suggested human control over nature, Friedrich's painting reminds us of nature's control over humans. *Wonderer above the Sea of Fog*, and *The Sea of Ice* are some other remarkable artworks by the artist that astonish the viewers.

The greatness of nature elevates one's mind. Therefore, nature was a key motif for the sublime in the artworks of Romanticism. Pictures of misty skies, tempestuous seas, vast gulfs and valleys, and dramatic mountain scenes were depicted on large-scale canvas to take the viewer's breath away. Wallace (1994) writes,

Jagged mountains shrouded in mist and scarred by gorges filled with ranging torrents are not themselves sublime, instead they owe their sublimity to vastness, obscurity and the like. Thus, paintings which convey the impression of these qualities are also sublime and have the added advantage that they are safer to admire. (p. 106)

The Romanticists were against the degradation of nature posed by the Industrial Revolution, followed by the expansion of factories and railroads. The British painters followed John Ruskin's idea of not imitating the natural world, but making a statement about it. Ruskin (as quoted in Collingwood, 1911) said,

Go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth. (pp. 126-127)



Fig. 5 J. M. W. Turner *Slave Ship* c. 1840

John Constable depicted the vast meadows in his landscape paintings, giving importance to the English countryside. Whereas J. M. W. Turner painted (Fig.5) expressive, violent, and imaginative landscapes and seascapes. Turner's paintings are almost abstract in form. They are his response to nature. They are not the depiction of the outer appearances, but the expression of felt experiences. His paintings juxtapose the essence of wild, grand, mighty, vastness of Mother Nature against the minuscule human figures and their human-made objects, suggesting the power of nature that is not subject to the laws of humans. He emphasized transient and dramatic effects of light, atmosphere, and color to portray a dynamic natural world capable of evoking awe and grandeur. He portrays violent storms, blizzards, fires, ruins, mortality, snowstorms, avalanches, thunderstorms, and other natural calamities. The viewers can feel the ecstasy of nature in his paintings.



Fig. 6 Albert Bierstadt *the Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* 1963

Inspired by Turner and his counterparts, the North American artists belonging to the *Hudson River School*, such as Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, Thomas Hill, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, explored the untouched wild and vastness of the American landscape in large canvases. They ventured to the wilderness of Yellowstone, Yosemite Valley, Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains (Fig. 6), Sierra Nevada, and other Wild West places to experience the sublimity. Some even travelled further down to the South Americas to explore the wilderness. These artists wanted to create works of art that translated the awe, terror, boundlessness, and divinity that they experienced at these dramatic spots. Their painted vision came to define what America looked like in the minds of many Americans.



Fig. 7 Theodore Gericault *the Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19)

The sublime effect of art also took a political turn in some countries during their civil revolution. Many political activities were occurring during the 18th century against their ruler or colonial power. Artworks depicting these scenarios, such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze, *The Raft of the Medusa* (Fig. 7) by Theodore Gericault, *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix, can be taken as a few examples.

The Raft of the Medusa is a political statement against the government that failed to listen to its citizens. The painting is about a real event. Here, at least 147 people were set adrift on a hurriedly constructed raft, where all but 15 died in the 13 days before their rescue, and those who survived endured starvation, dehydration, and even practiced cannibalism (Pittman, 2019). Depiction of horrifying incident, emotional intensity, and lack of heroism are the main characteristics of this painting. The figures in this painting are executed in life size, giving the sheer enormity of the tragic incident on a large canvas.



Fig. 8 Pablo Picasso *Guernica* 1937

The Cubist artist Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (Fig. 8) makes a statement not of politics alone, but of a criminal act against innocent victims. His *Guernica* is a terrifying and sublime icon of any atrocity against innocent civilians, from Hiroshima to Bosnia, from Dresden to Vietnam (Barrallo & Sanchez-Beitia, 2011, p. 217). Here, a small town, Guernica of Spain, that had nothing to do with military or politics, was bombed by Germany under the order of General Franco. Innocent civilians can be seen begging for mercy, dripping in sorrow, in the painting. On the left, a dove can be seen screaming behind the bull. Just below the bull is a mother in sorrow holding her dead baby, symbolizing Mother Mary holding her dead son. On the right-hand side, a woman can be seen being burnt alive along with the house. To her left is a woman holding a lamp, begging for mercy. All these atrocities led Picasso to fury and his urge to paint this painting.

The Abstract Expressionist artists explored the potential of the sublime in their artworks. The Romanticists and the Hudson River School took the idea of the sublime and depicted it in their artworks, but the New York Abstract Expressionist artists stole the idea of the sublime and used it as their main objective (Haber, n.d.). This cannot be truer than in the works of Jackson Pollock (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Jackson Pollock *One: Number 31* 1950

Pollock used his humongous canvas surface as an arena to act. He laid his canvas on the ground and worked from all four sides, pouring and dripping industrial paints all over the surface. These noble works were shocking to many viewers for their subject matter, scale, and technique. The works were vast in scale and were meant to be seen at a relatively close distance, virtually enveloping the viewer's sight. These artworks captured highly charged hand gestures and body movements of the artist. Rather than reproducing, redesigning, analyzing, or expressing an object, the artist focused on laying down the directness and immediacy of expression. The final result came as an unpredictable astonishment.



Fig. 10 Barnett Newman *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Man, Heroic and Sublime) 1950-51

Agreeing with Burke and Kant, Barnett Newman also believed the sublime to be different from beauty. In his essay *The Sublime is Now*, Newman questions "...if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?" (As quoted in Krebaum, 2016, p.82). One of his artworks *Man, Heroic and Sublime* (Fig. 10), is massive in size, filled with just a single warm red color. There are a few thin vertical lines, which he calls "zips." The imageless painting keeps viewers undistracted. The sheer size of the artwork keeps the viewer's sensory vision intact to the painting, letting their sublime feelings flow. The painting has nothing that particular to gaze at, but to experience.



Fig. 11 Mark Rothko a painting from *Rothko Chapel* (1964-67)

The Abstract Expressionist artist Mark Rothko started painting large canvases in black and other darker hues (Fig.11). He intentionally used a specific combination of colors, shapes, textures, and edges to create the impression of formlessness and limitless in the viewer, thereby disrupting our perceptual and imaginative resources and pushing us to the world of ideas (Kuplen, 2015, pp. 130-131). The sheer size of the painting, followed by several similar other paintings inside the Rothko Chapel, creates a sense of infinity, tragedy, ecstasy, and doom. According to art historian and theologian Jane Dillenberger (as cited in Elkins, 2004),

They were almost fifteen feet tall, dark and empty like the open doorways of some colossal temple....The more she stared, the more she felt at home. Then she was crying....It was a moment... of "very strange feelings," but mostly of relief, of perfect ease, of pure peacefulness and joy. (p. 2)

World War II caused devastation to human civilization. Humans' progress in knowledge and technologies proved counterproductive for themselves. The Abstract Expressionists began to explore the sublime feeling of transcendence and exaltation as a way to recover from the war's atrocities. Since Rothko comes from a Jewish community, a community that faced the Holocaust during Nazi Germany, these enormous paintings of his create a quasi-religious experience. His artworks do not imitate the sublime; instead, they evoke the sublime.

In today's contemporary art world, the sublime as an aesthetic element can be experienced in the works of Claes Oldenburg, David Hockney, Anish Kapoor, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Ai Weiwei, Subodh Gupta, and others. These artists produce their bodies of work in larger-than-life sizes or present them in quantities requiring huge areas. The viewers themselves feel minuscule in front of these artists' awe-inspiring artworks.

Conclusion

Sublime is an aesthetic quality that evokes awe and astonishment in our experience. It is one of the major aesthetic elements found in art. Sublime is a mixed feeling of fear and ecstasy. Sublime is not something that is presented, but something that is felt. Sublime can be evoked through magnitude, force, and quantity. We can experience the sublime in works of art. They are present in the ancient cave paintings. The pyramids and monumental sculptures by the ancient Egyptians are awe-inspiring. Artworks during the medieval period were able to incite religious sublimity in the devotees. Huge murals during the Renaissance reminded viewers of what it meant to be a human. Romanticist artists ventured into the wilderness to capture the sublime qualities in their artworks. Others made political statements. After the Second World War, the sublime again found its way into art through Abstract Expressionism, but instead of representing the sublime in artworks, they used it as their prime objective. Today, the sublime can be experienced in the works of many living contemporary artists globally. Sublime has become an essential aesthetic element in art today.

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