

The Gallery: Goethe's Stormy and Serene Art Ideals

By PARUL KAPUR

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Goethe's education in art did not begin until he was nearly 40, and already a celebrated novelist, playwright, poet and statesman. During an extended tour of Italy from 1786 to 1788, Germany's literary hero eagerly became a student again, contemplating the Renaissance masters, examining classical ruins, forming his notions of an ideal art. "Goethe and Art," the current exhibit at the Schirn Kunsthalle, does not focus specifically on Goethe's Italian journey, but its spirit underlies this examination of a legendary writer's relationship to the visual arts.

The exhibit, which coincides with the celebration of Frankfurt's 1,200th anniversary, resists submitting to adulation. "We don't want to perpetuate a personality cult," declares curator Sabine Schulze in the encyclopedic 644-page catalog. Nonetheless, since the show was conceived in the wake of reunification, Goethe clearly serves a political purpose as a symbol of the German nation. His life furnishes a convenient geographical bridge. Born in Frankfurt in 1749, he spent his adulthood writing and serving the court in Weimar, which lies in the former East Germany. The show (in Frankfurt until Aug. 7, then at Weimar's Schlossmuseum, Sept. 1-Oct. 30) is undeniably an homage to a German colossus, but an interesting one full of small revelations.

More than 300 paintings, drawings and sculptures have been assembled from the Goethe archives in Weimar and dozens of European and American museums. Works of personal significance to Goethe, hung in pastel-colored rooms after his Weimar home, include a handful of masterpieces he considered the apotheosis of art, his own quaint if unremarkable sketches, a gallery of his portraits, and a sampling from his

collection of 200,000-plus art objects.

Goethe's own era is represented mainly by the 18th- and early 19th-century landscape paintings that dominated the times. Of uneven quality, they range from sublime Romantic works such as the German Caspar David Friedrich's "Evening Star" (1825) to luridly thrilling smoke-and-fire spectacles of Vesuvius erupting by Philipp Hackert, an artist friend of Goethe's in Italy.

Most interestingly, the show illustrates how Goethe's scientific writings on geology and clouds influenced the vision of landscape artists. A room of cloud paintings is the prettiest in the exhibit. There can be no doubt, though, that these highly expressive studies contradicted Goethe's conservative artistic ideals.

The show hinges, in fact, on the conflict between the classical ideals Goethe absorbed from Italy and the Romantic artistic sensibility of his times. The narrative begins with the masterpiece of the show, Raphael's "St. Cecilia" (1514), on loan from the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna. This vivid, tender portrait of biblical figures listening to a choir of angels left Goethe speechless when he saw it in a Bologna church. The creator of "Faust," despite his impatience with religious themes, believed Raphael had achieved perfection in representing humanity, and the painting symbolized for Goethe art's lost golden age.

Perfect art in Goethe's view was defined by objectivity, harmony and an idealized beauty. Disdain for subjective, emotional expression was ironic coming from the genius of Sturm und Drang, a literary movement that exalted the realm of feeling. That period, however, represented a younger Goethe. The older Goethe mistrusted emotionalism and revered objectivity. For its serene blending of air, water and woods, he greatly admired Claude Lorrain's "Landscape With Tobias and the Angel" (1663), which hangs among the works he found ideal.

The desire to collect great art grew with Goethe's evolving roles as critic, patron and friend of artists. In startling contrast to our obsession with authenticity, however, the German connoisseur voraciously collected copies. Works on display from his private collection include pretty red-chalk studies of heads copied from Leonardo's "Last Supper" and reproductions of pastorals by Rubens and Poussin. A rare original is an elegant chalk sketch by Watteau, "Dancer and Danceuse" (1718), whose beauty Goethe acknowledged, although he dismissed the artist as frivolous.

Not only did Goethe find pleasure in visual art, but artists, too, found stimulus in his writings — his science essays, surprisingly, not his literary masterpieces. Consistent with the pioneer scientific spirit of his times, the writer was a self-taught geologist, botanist and meteorologist. The lovely cloud paintings on show by the Germans John Dahl and Carl Blechen were probably informed by Goethe's essay explaining Howard's theory of clouds. Often no bigger than postcards, these are rich, moody, jewellike oils. Four exquisite oil-on-paper sketches disclose similar cloud researches by England's great John Constable. Outstanding is his "Rainstorm Over Brighton" (1824-28), told in a few black and white streaks.

A pair of radiant atmospheric studies by J.M.W. Turner conclude the exhibit, and they are the most impressive paintings created under Goethe's influence. Inspired by his book "Theory of Colours," these paintings, "Shades and Darkness" and "Light and Colour" (both 1843), are swirling, hazy contrasting impressions of a blue-black deluge and its glowing reddish aftermath. Although he gave impetus to Turner's paintings, Goethe might have hated them since the British genius managed to subvert all his ideals.

Ms. Kapur is a writer in Frankfurt.