

Unit 3 – Contextual Study
How Art Portrays
Freedom Throughout Time
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How art portrays freedom throughout time

Art has played a pivotal role in recording, defining and exploring freedom as a concept and method of expression. Artists have portrayed ideological freedom and the reality of the world's freedom. They have explored spiritual, mental and material freedom and have raised questions of whether freedom really is as what we perceive it to be. Is freedom about living in luxury, free of suffering? Is freedom about not being under another's control? Or is freedom simply a moment of trance when a person is lost in an action, with no thoughts or attachments to anything in the world?



Krishna displaying His four-armed form, Unknown artist, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, Online.

Throughout history, religious messages have been used as key contexts for artworks. Artists have either promoted these religious beliefs or questioned their philosophy. Most religions have the same basic principles where they offer freedom from sins, material desires and this world. The anonymous artist of the painting of Krishna is promoting teachings from the sacred Hindu epic, The Mahabharat. In this scene, Krishna, a Hindu god, (the figure in the centre) is revealing himself as God to Arjun, a prince at war, and teaching him how to be freed from this world. The artist has

used Krishna as a symbol of freedom by placing the mighty godly figure behind the human Krishna. He uses majestic colours of gold and yellow which is complemented by the blueish purple complexion of Krishna's skin. Furthermore, there is light blazing out of Krishna showing that god enlightens the world and gives hope of freedom to everyone. The whole painting is addressing how god can free one's soul. In this painting, the horses of the chariot represent one's senses and Krishna is the chariot driver. The artist symbolises that freedom from the material world comes from placing one's senses in god's hands. The artist has painted this huge metaphor in an extremely detailed and realistic manner, thus making it a believable reality to his audience, and promoting Hinduism.



The Raft of the Medusa by Gericault, 1819
Oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris

While religions offered ideological freedom, some artists looked at more realistic moments of freedom. Gericault depicts a true extreme event of suffering and the point at which the people are about to be freed in his painting, *Raft of Medusa*. The painting is about the passengers of the lost French ship Medusa, who went through immense suffering, murder and even cannibalism. Gericault romanticizes his paintings using pathetic fallacy of an eerie cloudy sky and turbulent windy seas to further heighten the atmosphere in the painting. By studying scenes of battles by Michelangelo, Rubens and Gros, Gericault painted numerous bodies and corpses in revolting positions of despair and death. He skilfully uses light and shadow to exaggerate the gloomy mood of the

situation. By painting the raft so close to the foreground, he brings the audience right into the painting making them feel like a part of the disaster. The image is composed as an X with no central figure, but in four general groups ranging from lifeless bodies to those waving frantically at the sight of hope. Gericault forms a climax in the painting at the top where the last group waves a cloth calling to the distant boat,

Argus, to rescue and free them. Argus is painted extremely small, showing great distance, as it is just a small glimmer of hope at this point. The painting is about the moment of freedom, freedom from suffering, pain and death.

Artists throughout the ages have shown that freedom is a questionable state. We often think that living in comfort is freedom from suffering and living in poverty is like being enslaved. Alma-Tedema's fictitious painting is a great depiction of excessive luxury in the banquet room based on the life of the emperor, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Heliogabulus). Being the emperor of the whole of Rome, Heliogabulus had the freedom to do as he please, and being a sadist, he enjoyed torturing and even murdering his subjects and friends. Alma-Tedema's painting makes us question whether Heliogabulus was free to pursue his pleasures or rather a captive of his own senses. At first glance, it seems that some of the guests are playing in a bed of roses that have just fallen from a false ceiling above, but actually these guests are being smothered by the roses as they desperately try to shield themselves and crawl out of the rose petals, some even dying under the puddle of pink. A lady on the right of the painting is lying on a comfortable bed of cushions, but her face does not show happiness and her body position seems rigid and alert, almost like she's trying to get up but can't. She seems to be free to enjoy the pleasures of the palace but is in fact imprisoned by the emperor's satirical hobbies. Alma-Tedema has expertly made the scene seem like the guests are enjoying the emperor's hospitality, but in fact are far from being free. And it seems the emperor is free to do as he pleases, but is ironically a prisoner of his own disgusting desires and insatiable senses.



Roses of Heliogabulus by Alma-Tedema, 1888
Oil on canvas, Private collection.

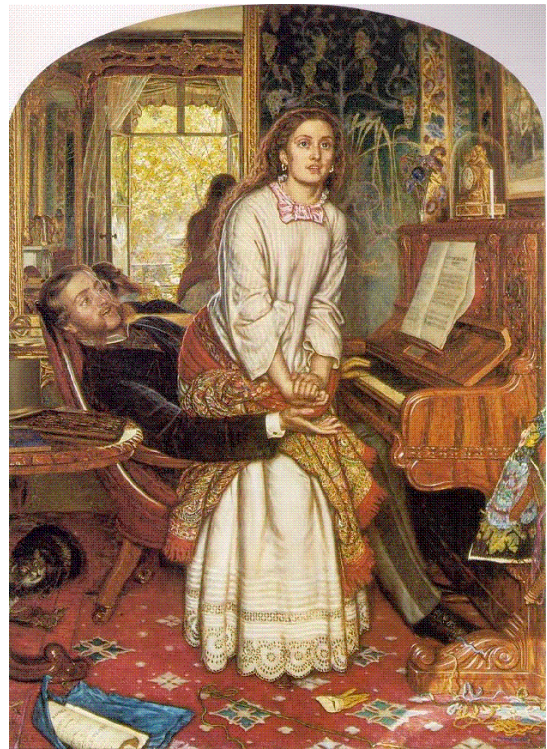
Card Players by Craesbeeck is a completely opposite scene from the above painting. It shows how the lower class workers enjoy their free time. Unlike the grand banquet room of Heliogabulus, *Card Players* is set in a small dark and gloomy room where the only source of light is from a little window in the top left hand corner. Craesbeeck takes advantage of the scarce lighting to give the whole scene a very dodgy mood. The character's faces are half hidden in shadow, which contrasting to Heliogabulus's face, openly shows their dishonest personalities. A man stands behind the centre card player holding a mirror showing everyone else his cards while another man is crudely urinating on the left wall. They don't have exotic food and wine but they are smoking and drinking all the same. The room is bare and empty with broken pipes and empty bottles strewn round the floor. The once whitewashed walls are old and tattered and a small child sits uncared for and unattended at the foot of the table. Craesbeeck's dark and gloomy picture also depicts a form of freedom. In many ways, it even depicts more freedom than the luxurious palace of Heliogabulus. The card



Card Players by Craesbeeck, 1645
Oil on panel, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

players don't have many material possessions and aren't surrounded by beauty but they are free to be there playing cards, drinking and smoking. They are even free to urinate where they please. They know exactly what cheaters they are facing and so are free to protect themselves. They are not bound like the subjects in the emperor's room.

Artists have recorded that freedom is most sought after in times when we are most oppressed. Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* is set in the Victorian days when women had no rights and were oppressed by men. In this painting, the lady is sitting on the man's lap but in a very rigid and awkward position as if she does not want to be there. She is holding her hands away from the man, shoulders slightly hunched inwards as if she is trying to shield herself away from him. It is obvious this is not her husband and does not live with her as he still has gloves on one hand, showing he must have only recently arrived. There is a present unwrapped and discarded on the floor, symbolizing what the man is doing with the lady. She is only his mistress, and he simply uses her and drops her when he's done. Scattered yarn on the floor symbolise her tangled life. Hunt uses the cat and mouse underneath the table as an allegory of the man and the lady. The cat has trapped the mouse and is merely toying with it before it kills it, similarly the lady is the prisoner of the man while he takes advantage of her and then forgets about her. Even the flowers on top of the pianos look lifeless and hopeless like the lady's situation. However, even though the lady is a prisoner in his arms, Hunt has painted her eyes shining with hope as she stares out of the open French windows to the bright sunny day outside, which symbolizes freedom. The music on the piano, Ruskin, brings back memories from her childhood, in the days she was carefree. Hunt shows that even though she is physically trapped, her mind is free looking past the boundaries into a place where she was once free.



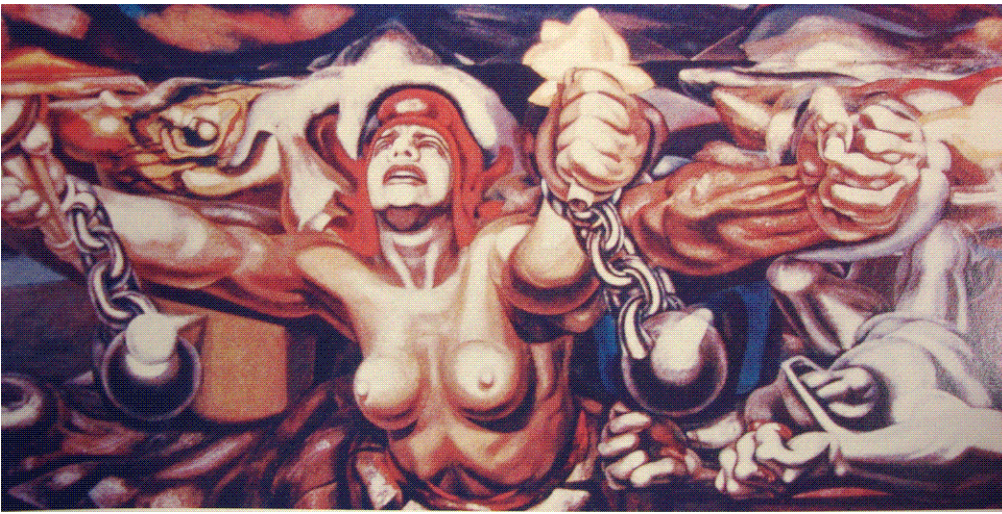
The Awakening Conscience by Hunt, 1853
Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.

Artists further explored the fight for freedom under oppression, but within large groups rather than the individual. Delacroix's painting, *Liberty Leads the People*, is a famous depiction of such a moment when a nation marches to its freedom led by the lady, Liberty, who is the very personification of freedom. The painting is of the historical moment when the people overthrew the Bourbon king in 1830. Liberty is depicted as a fierce lady striding bare footed straight out of the painting to the viewer, over the carpet of dying men whose dying sight is liberty. She is wearing a Phrygian cap and holding one arm up with the tricolore flag that symbolizes liberty. Delacroix paints her bare-breasted to make her look like a goddess saving the people, again returning to the theme of divine intervention for freedom. The bayoneted musket in her left hand show that she is fighting the war and the tricolore flag in her right hand symbolizes the French revolution. Delacroix uses light very selectively to illuminate certain features and leave others in shadow. The main source of light is coming from behind Liberty showing she is the source of hope and she is the saviour, similar to the previous paintings of gods, and that as she marches through the country, she brings with her light and freedom.



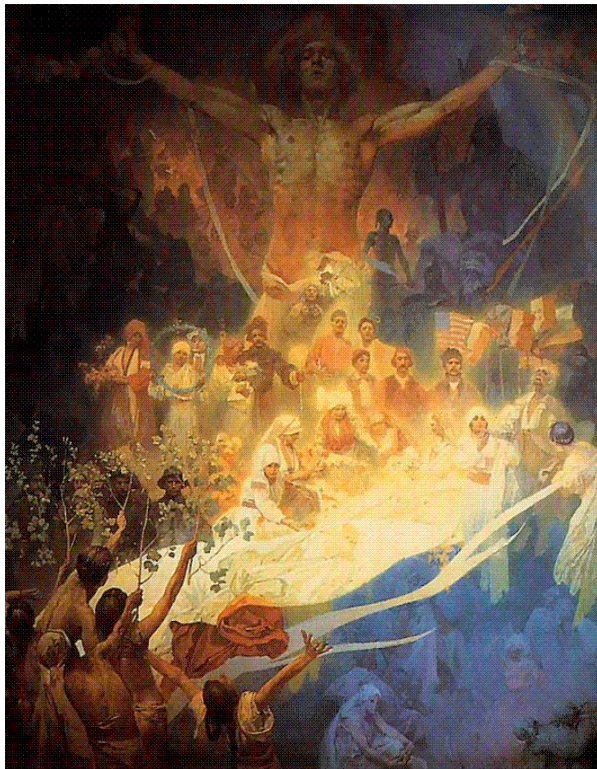
Liberty Leads the People by Delacroix, 1830
Oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris

Delacroix also uses contrast in subjects as the bottom half of the painting is scattered with dead fighters and the top half with fierce and lively public. Delacroix uses a mixture of classes, marching forward with Liberty, to show the unity of the nation to fight for their freedom as one.



The New Democracy by Siquieros, 1944
Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City

A more recent depiction of liberty is Siquieros's *The New Democracy*. Siquieros, who once taught Jackson Pollock, was quite inventive and contemporary himself. He introduced new techniques with frescos as he started working with concrete as his base instead of wet plaster and used airbrushes and stencils. Similar to Delacroix's *Liberty*,



The Apotheosis of the Slavs by Mucha, 1926
Oil on canvas, Private Collection

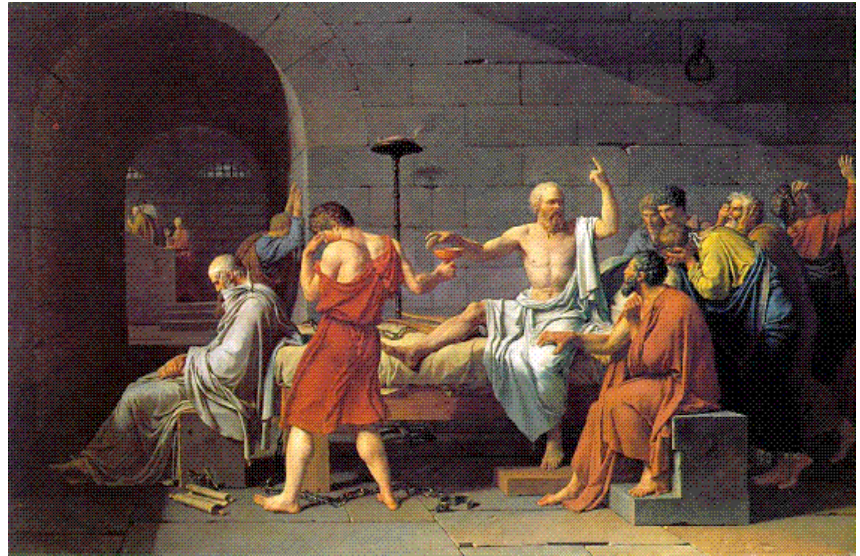
Siquieros also depicts a bare-breasted muscular woman, allegorizing a goddess, wearing a Phrygian cap. The Phrygian cap used to be worn by slaves in the Roman Empire who were freed of their masters, and by the 18th century, turned into a symbol for freedom. Also similar to Delacroix's painting, Liberty is holding one arm up with a torch to represent the new order and is bursting out of the painting to the viewer. In the right hand corner, a dead grey figure is lying, possibly in reverence for those that fought and died for the freedom of their country. Liberty is bursting out of a volcano, the emotions on her face exaggerated showing her determination and ferocity to fight for this freedom. Her first pair of arms are bound by heavy shackles that represent oppression and exploitation but her second pair of arms show she has broken free of these chains. Siquieros doesn't use many shades of colours, but rather exaggerates the painting with extreme contrast between the light and dark shades. His painting has a modern graffiti feel to it, which is a form of expression and freedom for many youth these days.

The Czech artist Alphonse Mucha also painted visions for the future of his people. He painted a series of twenty paintings that portrayed cultural, historical and spiritual aspects of the Slavs throughout the ages. One of his last paintings from the "Slav Epic" was an image

of freedom for his people called, *The Apotheosis of the Slavs*. He painted this piece just before the German occupation when political instability meant that people did not feel very free and optimistic. The image depicts the future he wished for the Slavs, free of other countries. His painting is composed in four general areas coded in four colours. The bottom right corner in blue shows the mythical early days. The red section in top left show life during the Hussite wars while in black to the right are the enemies of the Slavs. The majority of the image however is glowing in yellow light, which represents a free Slav, where all class of women, men and children are free from subjugation. There is a ribbon of yellow light running through the

bottom third of the painting in a very art nouveau style showing the optimistic energy running in the free people. In the bottom left corner, the youth of the nation are paying their respects to the Slav heroes. The central large figure represents all the Slavs have had to suffer in the past, somewhat like the catholic symbol of the cross where Jesus represents the suffering of the world. The central man's arms are also bound by ribbons, possibly for similar reasons as Liberty's arms are bound by chains in *The New Democracy*. Behind this central figure is Jesus blessing all the Slavs below. Mucha uses catholic, pagan, orthodox and protestant symbolisms in his paintings again representing freedom through unity. There is also a prominent American flag on the left to show gratitude for their help in freeing the Slavs. The entire painting looks to a free Slavic nation which compromises of harmony and peace.

Artists have always sought to be distinct and individual, at times choosing to flow against the norms, thus freeing themselves from the restrictions of societies. David's *The Death of Socrates* narrates the story of the great philosopher Socrates who, because he chose to freely think, was executed. The scene in the painting shows Socrates boldly sitting up, taking the goblet of the poisonous Hemlock without regret while his followers and students cry for him. The contrast between the disciples and Socrates is seen in their body positions, while they are hunched, hands rigid holding him back, or arms held up in despair, Socrates posture is straight and his right hand, very passively, is reaching out for the cup. This shows that even though the disciples are not imprisoned by metal chains, they are imprisoned by their emotions of despair and sorrow, and while a death sentence looms on Socrates, he has chosen to continue to think without oppression, and he freely chooses to take the goblet with his own hands. The metal bars in the painting are small and far in the background showing the prison is hardly affecting Socrates. The dim light outside the window shows that Socrates does not seek freedom outside, like in the *Awakening Conscience*, but in fact favours the freedom he will get inside this prison by drinking the poison and hence making his free thoughts and wisdom immortal.



The Death of Socrates by David, 1787
Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Flamenco V by Temelkov

On a simpler daily basis, people seek freedom from their day to day work through meditation or by doing some hobby such as playing sport, reading a book or watching television. *Flamenco V* by Plamen Temelkov is a contemporary painting of two dancers dancing. It has a Latin feel as it uses spicy shades of red, which also symbolizes the passion and fervour within the dancing and the intimacy between the two dancers who are disconnected, and free from the outside world. Temelkov uses very free marks and strokes giving the painting energy and dynamism. Not only is the subject of the painting, the dancing, symbolizing a form of freedom, but the actual making of the painting is itself a form of freedom as Temelkov chooses to depict his painting in a much more abstract way than the restricted ways of realist painters. The

dancers dance amongst a myriad of marks as Temelkov chooses not to restrict the painting by placing it in a setting but rather depicts the atmosphere and mood of the painting through the expressive background.

Another painter who is extremely expressive in his mark making is Jackson Pollock. Pollock's method of applying the paint and producing the final outcome is what is so free about his paintings. He splashes on colours, completely uncontrolled allowing his mood and motion to decide what the painting will be. In *Convergence*, Pollock does not restrict himself by any form or image, rather he creates a sea of lines, swirls and blobs of paints and



The Convergence by Pollock, 1952
Oil on canvas, Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery

colours. His paintings are also huge in size, unrestricted to space. Not only is the process of making the painting an act of freedom, but the aftermath, looking at the painting is an experience of freedom for the viewer as well. The audience is not constrained to depict the painting in a certain way, but can decide whatever they wish of the abstract piece. Someone might see a certain emotion in the painting while another might relate it to the atmosphere of an event. No one is right or wrong as abstract paintings such as these allow viewers the freedom to think whatever they wish of it.

Art has recorded how the interpretation of freedom has been evolving through time and makes you question what freedom really is. In times of violence, it's about fighting to be free, but peaceful times change freedom into indulgence so we can forget our daily affairs. Freedom is offered through religions, heroes and rescuers. Freedom is found through dance and movement. Freedom is sought as the freedom of speech and thought. Most of all, artists themselves are bringing about an expression of freedom by the very action of executing their paintings and exploring audacious ideas. Modern art itself has surpassed its boundaries as to what can actually be art, freeing itself from the traditional restricted genres and techniques. No matter where and when, the essence of freedom has always been about not being suppressed or restricted by boundaries and relieving ourselves from suffering.

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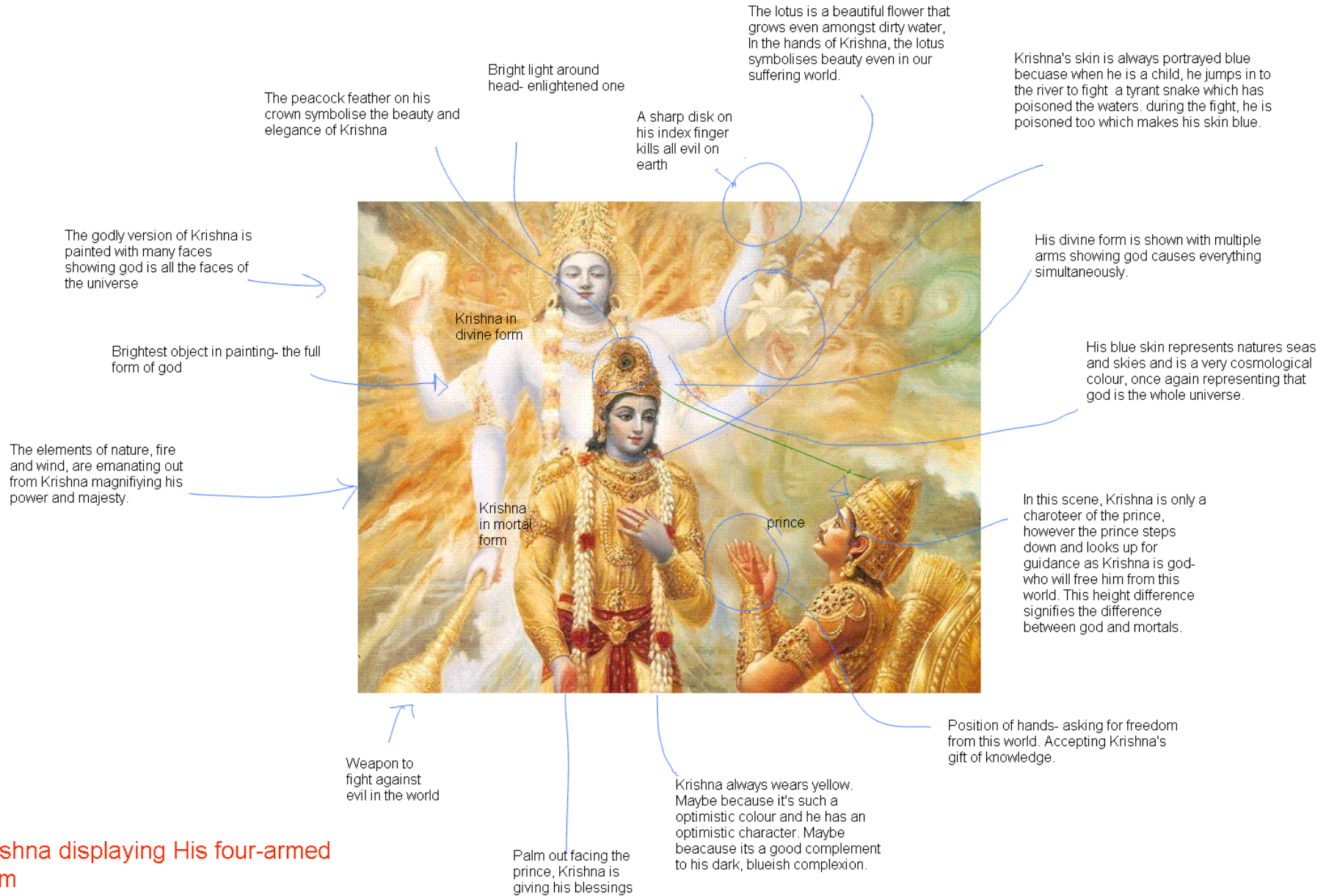
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Unit 3 – Contextual Study – How Art Portrays Freedom Throughout Time



Krishna displaying His four-armed form
from: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust

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The French ship, Medusa, was lost off the west coast of Africa in 1816. When the survivors returned, their story caused a lot of scandal in France as the catastrophe was blamed on the incompetent captain and inefficient rescue by France. When Gericault painted this, the French government took it as a personal attack.

Passengers on the ship went through immense hardship such as murder and cannibalism. It is said that the worst was too graphic for Gericault to even paint.

The tallest character presents a climatic finale to the narration in the painting where he waves a cloth to attract attention of the distant rescue ship

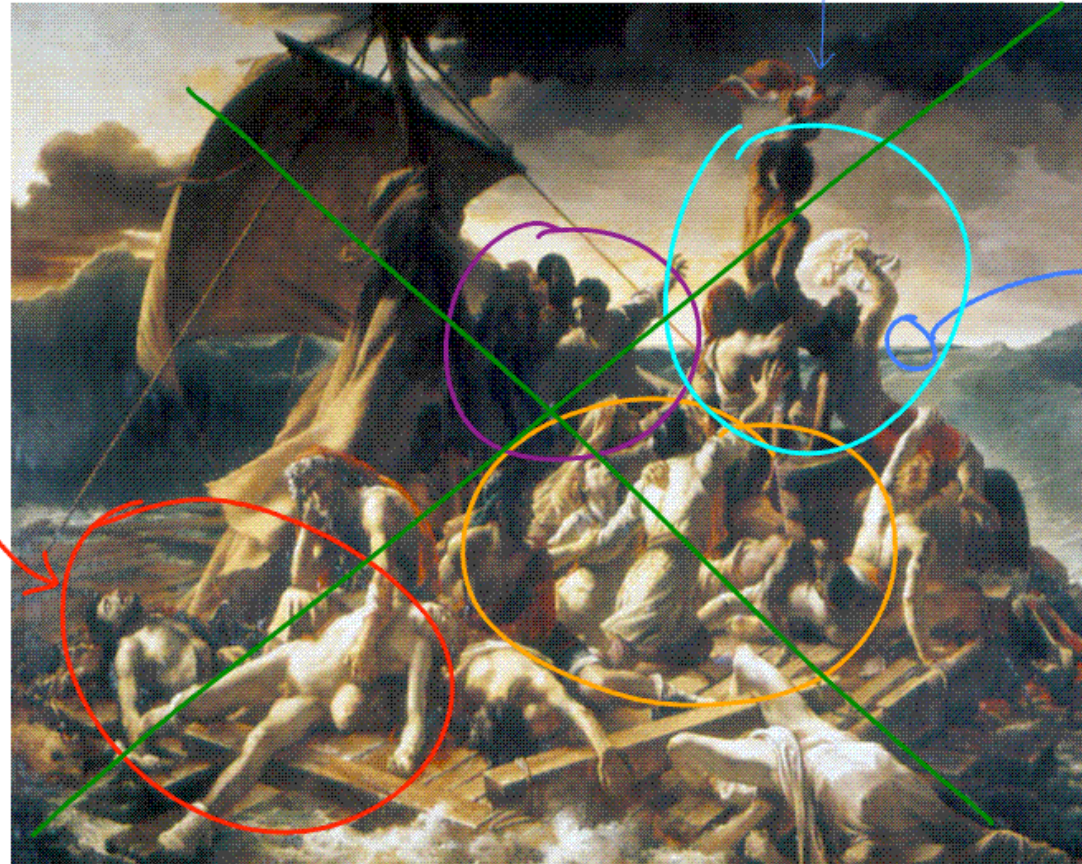
Everyone is focused on or is pointing to the boat in the distance

Gericault uses sharp light and shade which causes dramatic presentation of the contemporary events.

Corpses and bodies positioned in positions of great pain, suffering and despair. Some even dead.

The raft is close to the foreground which makes the audience feel like a part of the drama.

The painting is composed in an X shape



The rescue boat, Argus, is painted extremely small showing vast distance, adding tension in the painting of whether the survivors will be saved or not

The scene is of a climatic moment when survivors of the ship, Medusa, are about to be saved by a rescue ship. This is the moment the survivors shall be freed from the suffering.

Gericault studied scenes of battle and tourment by Michelangelo, Rubens and Gros to help him.

There is no central character but rather four groups:

- 1) The dead and hopeless
- 2) Survivors trying to get up
- 3) Survivors alert and watchful
- 4) Survivors that have caught sight of a rescue boat frantically waving for attention

Gericault uses pathetic fallacy to enhance the desperate situation the survivors are in by surrounding them in a turbulent sea under an eerie glowing cloudy sky

Raft of Medusa by Theodore Gericault

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The false ceiling is opened to allow a cascade of flower petals fall. Guests on the floor seem to be playing in the petals but are in reality being smothered by the petals, simply for the emperors amusement. The painting debates appearance vs reality in many such occasions

A young woman is playing a tibia (double pipes)
Music represents one of the five sensual pleasures
She is draped in leopard skin which is a rich fabric adding to the rich surroundings of the emperors palace.

Heliogabalus sits with his male lover and mother along with other beautifully decorated women

In the background is a statue of Maenad who is a worshiper of the god of wine. He stands with his lover Ampelus and his traditional companion, the leopard. This again adds to the rich surroundings and reminds us that Heliogabalus is constantly surrounded by symbols of pleasure

The painting is fictitious based on the life of the Roman emperor, Elagabalus, also known as Heliogabalus

Heliogabalus, whose actual name is Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, became the emperor of Rome when he was only 14. His name became Heliogabalus because he tried to make the sun god the main god in Rome.

He had transsexual qualities such as calling himself a "lady" and the "emperor's wife". He would seek "husbands".

Heliogabalus was a sadist and enjoyed watching others suffer, even die. He had a bronze bull statue in which he would place people and roast them alive while enjoying their screams that would come out of the bulls nostrils.



Heliogabalus is wearing golden silk, symbolising his royalty and wealth. He is also wearing a tiara which shows his transsexual characteristics

The painting's length and width use golden dimensions

The characters on the lower half of the painting have lifeless expressions, signifying their fate as the emperor is going to or has already killed them.

This woman lies on a pile of luxurious pillows yet her body looks rigid and uncomfortable. Her eyes are staring out of the painting into space, possibly hoping for a way out of this situation. A snake bracelet on her arm may also symbolise her upcoming death

This man's arm position looks like he is trying to shield himself from the petals

For the Victorians, roses often were symbolic of sensual beauty, corruption, and even death.

Roses of Heliogabalus by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Alma-Tadema used fresh roses from France every week so he could accurately paint the petals

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The top half of the painting consists of vibrant energetic people marching through while contrastingly the bottom half of the painting is scattered with dead and wounded people. Delacroix also uses a lot of contrast in brightness where most the light is pouring in from the back of the top half behind Liberty and most the dark regions are on the bottom half of the painting.

The people behind liberty are in heroic and lively poses as they fight for the freedom of their country

Liberty is based partly on the 'Venus de Milo'

On 28 July 1830, there was a revolution where the people overthrew the Bourbon King

Delacroix has drawn a self portrait

Tricolore flag of the french revolution

The lady personifies Liberty. She wears a Phrygian cap which also symbolizes liberty.

She holds a bayoneted musket symbolising she is actively taking part in the war

There is a small tricolore flag on the towers of notre dame far in the distance

Liberty is striding out of the painting into the viewer

She is bare footed and her breasts are showing making her seem like a goddess

Fighters are from mixture of classes

Boy represents the lower class

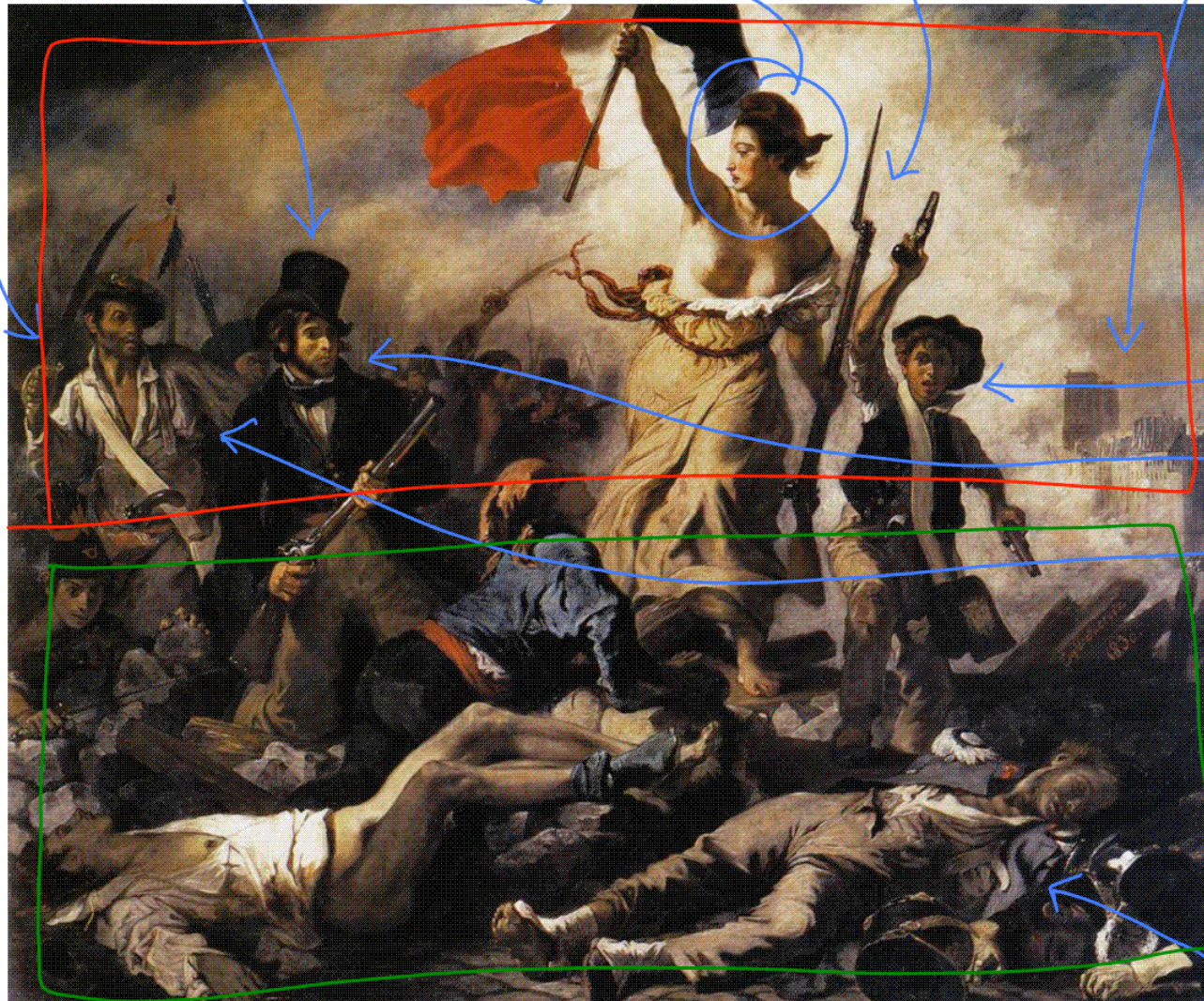
Man represents bourgeoisie

White shirted man with saber is a factory worker

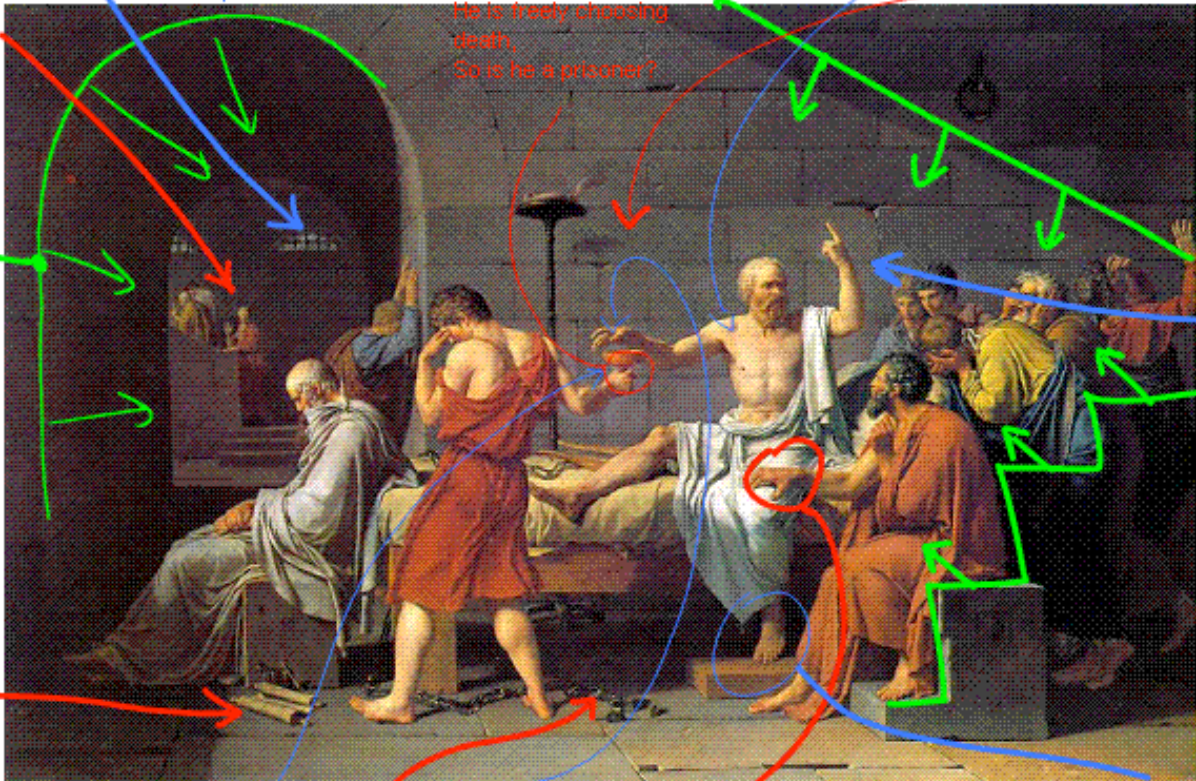
All the characters have fierce expressions full of determination

Liberty is the last vision of the dying men at her feet

The dead and wounded on the floor form a base under Liberty's feet.



Liberty Leads the People by Eugène Delacroix



The painting depicts Socrates in the center, surrounded by his students and family. He is shown in a state of calm, holding a cup of hemlock. The scene is set in a prison cell, with a window in the background and a lamp on a pole. The lighting is dramatic, with Socrates being the brightest figure. The composition uses a central archway to draw attention to the three small figures in the distance. The overall mood is one of solemnity and tragedy.

Light outside the window is very dim which shows freedom is not simply out of this prison but through thinking freely but as a consequence, death

Metal bars show he's in prison. But they're very small in the background emphasizing he's far from imprisoned

The cup contains a poisonous drink called Hemlock that will kill him. He knows this and is still freely taking the drink which shows his braveness at choosing death instead of exile. He is freely choosing death. So is he a prisoner?

His body is exposed, uncovered by cloth, possibly signifying that he is not covered in lies or shame. He believes in what he's doing and has no fear on

The lamp that provides light is the highest object in the room. The light symbolises salvation. The shadow of the lamp and pole are placed at such a point that it looks like Socrates is holding a staff, signifying the power in his

His wife is in the distance walking away from him.

This archway helps bring attention to the 3 small figures in the distance

All the characters are crying around Socrates, which shows they are bound by their emotions. This contrasts with Socrates unphased attitude, amplifying that Socrates is actually the one who is free of emotion and free to think what he wants

Everyone else's hands are raised in sorrow but his is up in confidence

These areas of dark are visual constraints, stopping the eye wandering off.

Scrolls on the floor represent that Socrates was a scholarly man

The cup is in the centre of the painting. It contains the poisonous drink Hemlock and so is both the symbol of death and freedom for Socrates

The chains are lying open on the floor showing he's free now

His hands are rigid and tense while Socrates hands passively take the cup of Hemlock. Again showing the contrast of moods

The lightest part of the picture draws our eyes towards him. The light white clothes make him look pure and holy

Socrates foot does not touch the floor, again making him seem holy and divine

The Death of Socrates by Jacques-Louis David