What Is Romanticism?

Romanticism began as a late eighteenth-century philosophy that embraced imagination, emotion, and the unknown. Affecting history, literature, religion, art, and home life, Romanticism offered an escape from the stresses of the early Industrial Revolution. Popular novels set in medieval times led to a passion for castle ruins and chivalry. Calvinist doctrine was rejected in favor of a more generous theology, laying the groundwork for the Second Great Awakening religious revival.

Especially in America, Romanticism emphasized the landscape, stimulating the Hudson River School artists and the Transcendentalist philosophers, who argued the perfectibility of man through the contemplation of nature. Decorative lithographs and popular literature disseminated sentimental ideals of home and family life.

The following sections of *Gothic to Goth* examine how costume of the early nineteenth century integrated all of these factors to create the fashions of the Romantic era.
The Wadsworth Atheneum’s founder, Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848), was a student of Romantic era art and philosophy. He was among an elite group of “picturesque travelers” who searched remote areas for natural beauty to appreciate and to sketch. Wadsworth also provided important patronage to young artists, including Thomas Cole and Hartford-born Frederic Edwin Church, who are now counted among America’s greatest nineteenth-century artists and leaders of the Hudson River School. Wadsworth likewise encouraged the young Lydia Huntley Sigourney (also from Hartford), who became America’s most recognized female writer, specializing in sentimental poetry. Wishing to leave a permanent legacy of art for the people of Hartford and beyond, in 1842 Wadsworth established the Wadsworth Atheneum, which opened to the public in 1844 with a burgeoning art collection of sublime landscapes.
Clothing of the Romantic era incorporates design elements from past centuries, creating unique combinations. For example, several hundred years of costume design are integrated into this fashion plate of early Romantic dress, including “slashing” in the sleeves, which first appeared in the late fifteenth century, a neck ruff popular in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and “vandyck” points on the sleeve cuffs (named for the famed seventeenth-century portraitist, Sir Anthony van Dyck).

This section of *Gothic to Goth* takes a chronological look at the historical influences that appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century: the Greek Revival of the 1820s and 1830s; the Gothic Revival, which was dominant in the 1840s; and the Rococo Revival of the 1850s.
Proponents of Romanticism rejected not only Enlightenment reason, but also Neoclassicism’s geometry and pale, monochromatic palette. Technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution allowed early nineteenth-century Americans to revel in color and pattern by decorating their homes with newly inexpensive paints, wallpapers, and textiles. This love of “Fancy” was part of the Romantic embrace of imagination and emotion. It led to colorful and abundantly embellished interior decoration and also influenced clothing fashions, especially in the 1820s and 1830s. While advice books admonished women for spending too much time and money on personal ornamentation, enthusiasm remained unabated for delicately embroidered shoulder capes and caps, carved tortoiseshell combs, stenciled velvet purses, colorful ribbons, beaded bags, dangling earrings, patterned scarves and shawls, and wide ribbon belts with elegant buckles.
Romanticism rejected the doctrine of predestination—by which only the “chosen” can be saved and go to heaven—and instead emphasized salvation through good, moral behavior. The Second Great Awakening, a religious revival characterized by lively camp meetings, became its most intense in America from about 1825 to 1850. The Gothic Revival style, which also reached the height of its popularity at that time, was associated with religious devotion because it evoked an idealized vision of the religious, medieval past. Period advice literature instructed women to express their individual faith through their dress and deportment.
Nature and the Picturesque

The roots of Romanticism reach back to the early eighteenth century, when landscape design shifted toward creating a seemingly natural effect—exemplified by rolling pastures dotted with trees carefully placed to appear random. These picturesque landscapes were celebrated by artists, poets, and tourists. At the same time, a fascination with nature’s awe-inspiring power—the sublime—spawned an enthusiasm for danger and unpredictability, including the supernatural. American Romanticism gave rise to the Hudson River School artists and Transcendentalist philosophers, who promoted the contemplation of nature as a path to personal perfection and a means of understanding the Divine.

The embrace of nature extended to women’s duty and appearance. As the primary guardians against the evils of urban industrialization, women were expected to create serene, pious homes—while clothed in reimagined medieval and Renaissance styles colored in the shades of moss-covered ruins and accessorized with an abundance of flowers.
The Natural Man

The epitome of the “Natural Man” was the Native American, based on the writings of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Like the idea that the simple agrarian life of the past was being lost in the smoke and squalor of urban industry, the idea that Native Americans were vanishing was promoted through lithographs, poems in ladies’ magazines, and popular fiction—most notably, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826. Ironically, of course, this was a period of concerted efforts to exterminate Native Americans, or at least move them onto out-of-the-way reservations, as with the Trail of Tears in the early 1830s—the forced removal of Native tribes from their ancestral homes in the southeastern United States to “Indian Territory” (modern-day Oklahoma).
The Natural Child

Children were also idealized as “natural,” unlike in earlier periods when their exuberance was squelched and infants were discouraged from crawling, because it was considered animalistic. Early nineteenth-century advice books for mothers encouraged more demonstrations of affection, less restrictive clothing, and more time outdoors.

The Age of Emotion

Sentimentality and emotion found expression in albums and friendship quilts inked with verses and loved ones’ signatures, in poetry about virtuous but consumptive girls who died young, and in jewelry woven from the hair of family members. For women especially, sentimentality was considered an important virtue—along with modesty, benevolence, piety, family devotion, and submissiveness. Moralistic essays in ladies’ magazines and advice literature reinforced these behaviors. Drawing a clear connection between appearance and conduct, Catharine Maria Sedgwick stated in her 1839 book, *Means and Ends: or, Self-Training*, “Bear it in mind, my young friends, that your dress is a sort of index to your character.”
Romantic Revivals

While sentimentality and an interest in historical design continued for the rest of the century, the foundations of Romanticism crumbled with the rise of a new generation that accepted and embraced industrialization. The sewing machine, new pattern drafting systems, and machine-made laces all contributed to increasingly complex and restrictive dress fashions after the mid-1860s. But a revival of Romanticism in clothing design came quickly in reaction to those fussy styles, and since then, Romanticism in various forms has returned to fashion about once every generation due to cultural stresses and the customary cycling of design inspirations.

Just as Romantic era clothing was inspired by the medieval and Renaissance past, the Goth and Steampunk fashion movements have grown out of a Romantic sensibility. Both are grassroots styles that started in the last quarter of the twentieth century and now provide inspiration for some of fashion’s leading designers.