

*Landscape and cultural content*

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When Filipe [Rocha da Silva] <sup>2</sup> first talked to me about this symposium on neolandscape <sup>3</sup>, I was excited as I had read Simon Schama's book on "Landscape and Memory" <sup>4</sup> and was fascinated by so much of it. Then I decided to write this art history paper to demonstrate how landscape painting has always contained cultural content... despite its innocent appearance... it has always been a heavily weighted player...

Landscape painting has always had cultural content in the Western tradition despite the commonly held misconception that background landscapes are only a little view of 'reality' or a window onto the 'real world'... And landscape painting has existed since antiquity. Although in Italian 14th-16th centuries, painting landscape was largely confined to covering background spaces, this was done to indicate a second level of time. To place the Crucifixion in the valley of Arno for example was following the theological prophecies of Joachim del Fiore by which – as Giotto (1267-1337) illustrated in the Scrovegni chapel (1303-05) – there were three parallel time periods following a progressive revelation. That of the God, that of Christ, and that of the present time, of the Holy Spirit that paralleled each other and according to this eschatological time frame that messianically was leading to the end of the world. So for Masaccio (worked between 1401 and 1428) in placing St Peter on a Florentine street (Brancacci chapel, 1424) was to locate the mission of Christ in contemporary time.

Landscape views were often cityscapes used as a property or dowry record – the simplest example of this are the views of the cities owned by Florence frescoed on the courtyard walls in the Palazzo Vecchio.

In the Western tradition, it is the French Revolution (1789) that shakes up the European class system and with it the class structures inside the Art Academies. Landscape painting (which was considered the lowest form of painting because it was considered unable to instruct to higher aims, In contrast to history painting which did,) was suddenly reevaluated. In 1817 landscape painting became an official part of the Academy's main curriculum because of a new nationalistic patriotism in Europe, a new evaluation of the value of farmers or lower classes, because of Rousseau's philosophy and his ideas on the state of nature and the innocence and importance of natural law. The painters of the Barbizon School in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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'returned' to nature... or rather found in nature like the great Romantic poets a way of finding in landscape the true ethical instructor.

So you have in that great painting by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), shown in his own exhibition tent outside the Great Exhibition of 1855 in Paris, "The Studio - 7 years of my life", the artist himself is painting a landscape (not a didactic history painting) and is firmly turning his back on the nude. When Courbet was invited in the July days, by the students of the Art Academy to come and teach them, instead of a human nude he put an ox on the model stand.

It is however perhaps most in Millet's (1814-1875) pictures that the peasant reaches equality with the viewer and dignity in his labour. Although interestingly enough when this picture, the "Angelus", expressing the peasants' humble beliefs, crossed the Atlantic as a print reproduction it was a best seller in the USA, it retitled "They buried the baby"...talking about the hardships of the settlers march West...

The steady reevaluation of landscape in turn leads on to the ideas of John Ruskin who in 1856 in *Modern Painters* expounded the pathetic fallacy – the way painters (or artists in general) endow the world with human emotions which he saw pervading the Romantic tradition: "To signify any description of inanimate natural objects that ascribes to them human capabilities, sensations and emotions". To Ruskin this emotional description of nature, that talked more of the interior than the exterior mind, was against truth which was to be accurate not to be say swayed by imagination or our fanciful reflections on it "The foam is not cruel

Neither does it crawl"

For Ruskin creating a representation of nature was to be close to the Creator and the inherent benefits of learning from Nature.

This new evaluation of landscape in Western art did not have a single cultural function. In America which has its own very different cultural expression landscape became as Broude has shown a language of possession and imperialist expansion.

In Europe the political changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be found in its gaze.

Let us take this famous Constable (1776-1837) painting of Salisbury Cathedral. Against the political background of the Luddite rising when England was experiencing the closest thing to a peasants' revolution it has ever experienced with ricks and farm buildings burning, thousands of dispossessed peasants condemned and many executed or sent to Australia and the Duke of Wellington then Prime Minister trying to stop or modify the Great reform Act (1832) that would extend suffrage and destroy the rotten boroughs like Salisbury (Salem – it's key example). Constable shows a completely unreal landscape of peasants humbly working in their station and church and aristocracy firmly in their places, glorified by heavenly radiance. In a sense it is a political Conservative prayer.

In Turner (1775-1851) instead you see instead the idealization of Switzerland, the cantons of freedom where so many Protestant and free thinkers like Voltaire had gained refuge, The Switzerland of Childe Harold (Byron) that had a democratic structure far more advanced than most countries in Europe. On the other hand, the German or Northern painters of the 17, 18th Centuries who went south to Italy on the

Grand Tour, were looking instead for a "Nietcheresque" dream of a landscape of ancient Greece (Magna Grecia) conceived of as a time that preceded the Judaeo-Christian ethical controls, a place where even today tourists come to run naked on the beaches. Something that can be done under the Southern pagan sky of course that they would never do at home.

This search in the Italian landscape for Arcadia has a long tradition in Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), Poussin (1594-1665), and so many others.

Today, as we have only a little time, I want to mention the Macchiaioli. The Italian landscape painters who painted their native land as they fought to free it from foreign oppression and rule in the 1840's-70's... in the battles of the Risorgimento. "Macchia" means blob or stain, the swift, impressionistic application of paint, but it also means the scrub growth of bushes, the material that makes charcoal that humans or revolutionaries use to ignite fires.

Following from a prior Hungarian/Tuscan tradition, the idea of painting the soil and scenes of everyday peasant life was a revolutionary subject. This was true both in terms of the artist's prior traditional academic training and because the artists involved were following Mazzini's ideas of the painting every day life. The Republican Mazzini was one of the three revolutionary figures of the Risorgimento and its main theorist. The idea of painting contemporary life precedes the influence of Baudelaire on the Impressionists in France: Mazzini wrote that art was an essentially belief, "an eminently social expression", "an act of resistance and freedom or a promise of change." He condemned the sentimental effusion of the Romantics but sought a view of contemporary life that exalted the individual and at the same time the collective spirit.

The Macchiaioli precede chronologically the Impressionists and had a profound influence on them and on their painting technique through Degas (1834-1917) and Manet (1832-1883) who visited them in Florence. Painting fast mostly without preliminary drawing, outside, often in the case of the Macchiaioli they painted between battles, painting on the small planks from the ammunition boxes they were using, between Garibaldi's marches and battles. They produced tiny paintings of intimate life, showing the humanity of peasants, women and children, of the ghetto, the subjects of the new freedoms whose liberty they were fighting for. These landscapes are possibly the most revolutionary paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I want to show you just a few, as for the most part they are very unknown. Their tiny dimensions have led them to be under valued as have their apparently simple execution. Instead they are profound statements of the land of the Patria... the native land for which the Macchiaioli fought, and are of a great sophistication and interest, when reviewing the use of landscape as a genre.