

The Beautiful, the Picturesque, the Sublime: Landscape painting from Claude to Turner

Beth Taylor - 17 October 2012

Background Notes



Claude Lorrain *Landscape with Apollo and Mercury* (c.1645)

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Aesthetics and the status of the landscape genre.

Landscape did not emerge as an independent genre in Europe until the 16th century. The German artist **Albrecht Altdorfer (c. 1485-1538)** made landscape a subject acceptable for its own sake. Northern landscapes were typified by naturalism, while the Italians developed ideal, heroic and pastoral forms. As a genre it was considered a less important form than history painting. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it enjoyed high status in Britain. More than a third of exhibited paintings in the Royal Academy were in this category, and there was an abundance of prints and publications on the subject. As well as the quality of the work being produced by painters like Constable and Turner, there were other factors at play.

- Arguably, landscape art provided a respite from growing industrialisation and rural poverty at home and the horrors of war across Europe.
- From the time of the Enlightenment, scientific developments including the observation and recording of natural forms and phenomena made this period a great age of natural history.
- The development of travel and tourism brought with it a desire to acquire pictures of the places visited.

The development of aesthetic concepts enriched landscape art, providing an intellectual framework for its contemplation while the Romantic movement added the power of the artistic imagination to enhance the experience of landscape and modern developments like the railways provided new motifs within the landscape.

The Beautiful

The period of the Enlightenment, often called the 'Age of Reason', from c.1740-1780 was marked by the expansion of knowledge and the application of reason and scientific methods to develop universal truths. This approach was also used in the field of aesthetics. **Edmund Burke (1729-1797)**, Whig politician, philosopher and writer, expounded in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), his view that the most significant types of aesthetic experience, the beautiful and the sublime, were brought about by different properties which could be identified and which had predictable physical effects on viewers, causing emotional responses. **Beauty**, characterised

by smallness, smoothness, delicacy, continuous contours, was regarded as the cause of a calm, balanced and delightful aesthetic experience.

For landscape artists and their patrons, the works of the 17th century artist **Claude Lorraine (1600-1682)** provided a template for the “beautiful” landscape.

- set in the Roman campagna familiar to those who had completed their education with a Grand Tour of Italy
- classical themes and allusions to the grandeur of Ancient Rome familiar to those whose education had been based on the study of Latin and Greek
- mellow light
- carefully graduated distances
- sweeping lines and compositional balance
- a vision of pastoral beauty , a Golden Age, before the corrupt dealings of the modern world

Through his judicious selection and embellishment of natural features, Claude showed his respect for the concept of beauty developed by the Athenian philosopher **Plato (c429-347BC)**, i.e that underlying the imperfect forms of the visible world, there lies a world of more perfect forms of beauty.

For the essayist William Hazlitt (1778-1830) Claude exemplified the ideal of beauty because “he balances and harmonises....He is all softness and proportion.....that which satisfies and accords with the innermost longing of the soul”.

In England, a cult of Claude developed, begun by British ‘Grand Tourists’. Many of the aristocracy owned originals by Claude. Designers such as Capability Brown and William Kent reproduced his ideal views in the parklands of great houses. Claude’s drawings were collected with no less enthusiasm by English connoisseurs, as a result, over 40% of his drawings are now in the British Museum. Claude’s influence on later artists is apparent in the work of Gainsborough, Constable and Turner. **J.M.W.Turner (1775-1815)** was to maintain an intimate artistic dialogue with Claude throughout his career. In his will he instructed that his paintings *Dido Building Carthage* and *Sun Rising through Vapour* should be hung in the National Gallery between two paintings by Claude, *Landscape with Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca* and *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*.

The Picturesque or Picturesque Beauty

An aesthetic category that lay between the beautiful and the sublime. The cleric, artist and writer, **William Gilpin (1724-1804)** was the most important influence in the development of picturesque taste in the second half of the eighteenth century. He made a number of 'picturesque' travels in Britain and his publications on these became popular guides for those aristocrats, gentry, professional and middle classes whose interest in British tourist developed at the time when travel to Europe was impossible due to the war with France 1793 to 1815. Interest in the landscape of Britain also owed something to patriotism, to improved coach travel and to the wish to escape from industrialisation and its effects on the urban landscape of the time.

In his *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty: On Picturesque Travel: and On Sketching Landscape* 1792 he set out his definition of the picturesque and how to depict it. His theory attempted to combine the classical harmony of Claude with the contrived naturalism of northern artists like **Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9-1682)**. He defined the 'picturesque' composition as one in which observed elements of the natural world were framed or contained by features such as trees, rocks or mountains, placed at the sides or in the background. The scene should be full of visual intricacy, the play of light, variety and roughness or ruggedness: winding rivers and paths, moss-strewn rocks, irregular shores, dappled or contrasting effects of light and cascading water. The aim should be to put together 'congruous' landscape elements into a 'beautiful' whole rather than putting everything 'as it comes'. In order to express the true beauty of an actual landscape feature it was often necessary to alter the foreground and allow the play of the imagination.

Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829) who had laid out his Herefordshire estate on picturesque lines, analysed the picturesque further in his *Essays on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful* 1794. He contended that the picturesque was a third species of aesthetic pleasure on a par with the beautiful and the sublime and that the specific feeling caused in us by the picturesque is curiosity – it keeps us active, we want to go on exploring the picturesque object.

Ruisdael influenced the landscape work of **Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88)** and **John Constable (1776-1837)**. His emphasis on the changes in weather and the play of light gave an emotional content to his paintings which was to inform the more romantic sensibility demonstrated

in Constable's works. **Gaspard Dughet (1615-1675)** enjoyed great prestige in Britain and was model for British landscape painters especially for his selection of picturesque motifs.

The Sublime

In Burke's *Enquiry* the sublime was the antithesis to the beautiful. The principal qualities of the sublime for Burke were obscurity, power, privation, emptiness, greatness of dimension, infinity. "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger...is a source of the sublime; that is, productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling". The feelings aroused by the sublime were astonishment and fear, so that all the motions of the mind were suspended by some degree of horror or terror. The mind, he said, "is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it".

In landscape art, the type of works which could be the source of the "delightful horror" caused by the sublime were exemplified by the work of **Salvator Rosa (1615-1673)**. . 18th and 19th century art produced by painters such as **Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797)**, **Philippe de Louthembourg (1740-1812)** and **John Martin (1789-1854)** were marked by the compositional devices of diminutive figures, dwarfed by the vastness of their surroundings, and by dramatic fluctuations of light and dark. A developing Romantic sensibility, which valued the individual imaginative power of the artist and whose work provided a mystical encounter with the ultimate is typified by the sublime images in the work of **Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)**. Turner's explorations of the effects of the elements – light, fire, water, air and earth – in his work produced both examples of the sublime in the modern as well as landscapes which are almost exercises in abstraction.

Glossary

Arcadia: a remote mountainous area in the Greek Peloponnese transformed into the original and ideal place of pastoral song in Virgil's *Eclogues*

Atmospheric (or aerial) perspective: a system for suggesting depth or distance in a painting that attempts to imitate the actual effect of atmospheric conditions on the way in which we see things. As objects recede into the distance they become less distinct, more blue and lighter in tone.

Beautiful: an aesthetic category theorized by Edmund Burke and derived from classical idealism. In visual terms it was typified by the smoothness, roundness, and continuous contours evident in Claude Lorrain painting.

The Enlightenment: the period between c. 1740 and 1780 when it was considered that human happiness and progress could be increased by the application of reason and that all areas of human enquiry were susceptible to reasoned understanding of cause and effect, ultimately expressed in universal laws or principles.

Platonic concept of beauty: the idea of an unchanging reality beyond that graspable by the human senses. Thus the artist's role was to strive to perceive and represent the archetypal forms which constitute true beauty.

Picturesque: 'like a picture'; an aesthetic category somewhere between the beautiful and the sublime. William Gilpin created a formula for picturesque landscape art composition which was associated with visual qualities of roughness, variety and contrast.

Repoussoir effect: an object or figure that makes other objects behind it appear to be located deeper into the imagined space of the picture.

Romanticism: a stress on the power of the imagination and a view that the artist was endowed with genius – the ability to give access to ultimate truth. Those works of art considered profound were those which could suggest new ideas and new interpretations. The unbounded, unknowable, sublime was an important Romantic trope.

Side screens: pictorial linking devices and motifs that connect a series of receding vertical planes like theatre scenery projecting onto the stage from the wings.

Sublime: as theorized by Edmund Burke the sublime inspired feelings of astonishment and terror and was associated with objects of an overwhelming nature or scale.

The Grand Tour: a conventional feature in the education journey usually through France and then Italy, culminating in Rome, for at least 1 or 2 years, sometimes in the company of a tutor. This became a conventional feature in the education of an English gentleman seeking the sources of the classical culture in which they had been steeped and laid the basis for many collections among the landed gentry of paintings by Italian masters like Claude Lorraine as well as spreading the fashion for Palladian and neo Classical architecture.

J. M. W. Turner

Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway (1844)

