

American Sublime: Landscape of the 19th Century

Background Notes

Hendrika Foster - 22 March 2017



Frederic Church, *Cotopaxi*, 1862, Detroit Institute of Arts



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American Sublime: Landscape Painting of the 19th Century

The genre of landscape painting developed slowly in Europe from the 18th century. The landscape painting of America was not simply a new genre, much of it was an entirely new phenomenon of awesome beauty in the western art world. The vastness of the New World, the dramatic mountains, deserts, forests and lush agricultural lands were largely unknown to other Americans let alone Europeans. Artists were accused of exaggerating their colour palette as they portrayed a nature of such brilliance it would put a sunset by Claude or Turner into the shade.

The vast images by **Thomas Cole** were dubbed 'American Sublime'. This young immigrant from Lancashire would be seen as America's first great landscape painter and founder member of the Hudson River School, who was followed by **Frederic Church** who extended his repertoire into South America. Scenes of the Mid-West are captured by **George Caleb Bingham**, whilst images of the untamed West are seen in the drawings of **Albert Bierstadt** during his travels, later used as a basis for his paintings. **Winslow Homer**, born in Boston, visited Paris and lived for a while near Newcastle in NE England. His powerful and at times enigmatic paintings capture his own personal visions of land and sea as a drama of the natural world.

19th Century American Landscape Painting

“Whatever transports us with wonder is more effective than something which merely pleases us. When we are being persuaded we are usually in control, but sublimity has an irresistible power over us.”

Longinus 1st century CE

By 1800, the huge innovation by Benjamin West of using modern history as the subject of a history painting seemed no longer relevant for American artists painting either in Europe or America. Joshua Reynolds had pioneered the elevation of portraiture to history painting by creating full length images surrounded by the minutiae of antiquity. This too seemed old fashioned and irrelevant for the American New World almost 25 years after 13 states declared Independence on July 4th 1776. The inspiration for a new wave of American artists was the land that surrounded them in their new continent. They would elevate landscape to a new genre of ‘history painting’. Their land was their history in the making, but to the average American land was territory, property, raw material that could be turned into a fortune.

Western Expansion

In 1800, the US stretched inland from the East coast only as far as the Mississippi river. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson agreed the purchase from the French of 820,000 square miles of land west of that river. This amazing ‘deal’ was known as the **Louisiana Purchase**, when land cost less than 5 cents an acre. The progress of the pioneers who would explore, map and record this land provided new images of trees, flowers, animals and birds hitherto unknown. **Meriwether Lewis** and **William Clark** led a government sponsored

expedition to explore this vast wilderness soon after the signing of the purchase, discovering 180 plants and 125 animals hitherto unknown to scientists. As so called *progress* continued, the face of this mostly virgin landscape changed for ever. De-forestation of thousands of square miles was needed to provide the wood for building towns, canals and railways. Steamships and trains provided opportunities for ordinary Americans to explore their new world in comfort from Lake Erie to New Orleans. Tourism for Americans in America began with a vengeance. Artists approached this opportunity in a variety of ways. Some painted, with great nostalgia, the loss of this land perceived as God given to America. Others embraced the new progress or recorded the new discoveries and new occupation opportunities. From the centre of America progress demanded more and dictated **“GO WEST”**.



Thomas Moran, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 1872, Department of the Interior, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Thomas Moran, *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872,
Smithsonian Institution of Washington



Winslow Homer, *Veteran in a New Field*, 1865, Metropolitan Museum, New York

Thomas Cole (1801-48) wanted to capture the landscape of this glorious wilderness before it changed forever - forests, rivers, mountains and deserts, never explored and never recorded. The act of painting this landscape became an assertion of national identity and religious faith. Cole became the first great American landscape painter. Born in Lancashire, he emigrated to the US when he was 17. In 1823, he began studying at the new Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts founded in 1805, and then travelled back to Europe for three years when Constable and Turner were painting. In 1833, he moved to New York and the Catskills, becoming a founder member of **The Hudson River School**, which marked the official beginning of American Landscape Painting. Cole's nostalgic view of a pristine Arcadia proved very popular. Even the ruthless, wealth driven

industrialists liked the idea of capturing an image of their land before cities, canals, railways and oil wells moved in. Cole went one step further. He painted virgin America, frequently threatened by a stormy sky but always with a glimpse of God given light upon the God given land. He often painted on a large scale prompting descriptions of ***Magnificent and Sublime***.

Frederic Church (1826-1900) became a student of Cole's and would eventually surpass his master. He, too, believed in "a higher style of landscape" and included notions of sublimity, morality and God given land but added the current American mantra of ***Manifest Destiny***. In other words, both these artists depicted in paint what Americans believed, that westward colonization of America was not only a right but a sacred duty. However fanciful these ideas may seem today, the result was the most astonishing landscape paintings. Church travelled extensively in North and South America as well as Europe, and exhibited his works as a flamboyant self-publicist should; this resulted in the highest prices an American artist had ever achieved. America was too big to encourage people to visit an exhibition of art in one gallery therefore the art had to travel to the people. People flocked to see Church's *Niagara* in America and in its tour of England. His *Heart of the Andes*, measuring ten by five feet, was exhibited at one venue and 12,000 people paid a quarter to see it. **Art in America was power, but for the first time this was commercial power.**

Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) would promote and enlarge the images of Manifest Destiny. German by birth, Bierstadt arrived in America when he was two years old and grew on up the coast of Massachusetts. He returned to Germany to study at the Dusseldorf Academy, acquiring a high academic polish and a meticulous eye for detail in his work. In 1858, he joined a western surveying expedition from Wyoming to the Pacific. Sketch book in hand he recorded the

majesty of this new land and returned to New York to paint it. Manipulating accurate topography, his western composite super-views were an instant success. The peak of his career coincided with the boom in Western business – logging, mining and railroads. The newly wealthy industrialists wanted to decorate their new vast mansions with art just as the ancient Romans decorated their palazzi. The difference was that Bierstadt could command 12,000 dollars for *Domes of the Yosemite* from the magnate Legrand Lockwood.

Like Cole, **Thomas Moran (1837-1926)** was a child immigrant, his family settling in Philadelphia. The work of J.M.W. Turner was a profound influence. He joined an official US Geological and Geographical Survey in the Yellowstone region of Wyoming and Montana and was inspired to create paintings of the magnificence of nature, the like of which had never before been captured on canvas; The Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley in California and The Chasm of Colorado.

A Bostonian, **Winslow Homer (1836-1910)** represents a move to the Modernity that would be popular at the end of the century. Much of his work is perhaps better described as 'genre', but his use of landscape in the modern way, which resulted in works like no other. He is a fascinating artist with whom to close the century and the subject of Landscape.

The genre of art which most closely followed the historical development of the new continent of N. America was Landscape painting. It can be seen to encompass the dreams, the pride and aspirations of a new people. It records new scientific discoveries and new literary expression and new philosophical ideas. The power of images of American landscape became the essence of the artistic zeitgeist of the 19th century New World.

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