

Industrail Landscapes

Background Notes

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Philip De Loutherbourg, *Iron Works at Coalbrookdale*, 1801,



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Industrial Landscapes

Landscape artists began to introduce elements of industry into their work from the early days of the industrial revolution in eighteenth century Britain. This talk will explore the development of industrial landscape art by focusing on the different motivations and styles of a wide range of landscape artists.

The mid eighteenth century saw a growing enthusiasm for the picturesque in landscapes such as the Peak District in mid 18th century. Early industrialisation gave an extra dimension to the rugged and dramatic landscape of areas like the Peak District. The search for the Sublime encouraged painters to depict these landscapes in dramatic night lighting (*Cover, Iron Works at Coalbrookdale, 1801, Philip De Loutherbourg*). At the same time voices of protest against perceived horrors of social and aesthetic disaster led to an apocalyptic sense of devastation, exemplified for many in John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath*. The different approaches to industrial landscapes were beginning to become apparent as attitudes to industrialisation became more complex – painters such as Joseph Wright of Derby were commissioned by industrialists to produce landscapes depicting factory premises as aesthetically pleasing, like country house vistas.

During the nineteenth century, artists responded to the new visual imagery and effects produced by industrial development and social change and, as the industrial cities grew, increasingly depicted industrial scenes as representations of modern life. The earlier works of JM Turner in Newcastle and Leeds illustrate this, depicting the urban landscape atmospherically leading the eye to the smoking factories in the background. As industrialisation came to France in the later nineteenth centuries the Impressionists in their commitment to being “Painters of Modern Life” (in the words of Baudelaire)

incorporated these developments into their landscapes of the environs of Paris. (Fig. 1, *Factories At Argenteuil*, Gustave Caillebotte, 1888.) This provoked critical controversy about what is beautiful and appropriate for artistic representation. At the same time Whistler was recognising beauty in urban industrial landscape evoked in his *Nocturnes* depicting the mystical effects of the river Thames in London.

In Britain the impact of the Impressionists, followed by the Post-Impressionist influence of Cezanne and the Fauvists, was shown in the work of the Camden Town group, with a realist approach to recording contemporary urban life. This included some industrial landscapes by Harold Gilman and Charles Ginner in London and Leeds. The most radical departure from the traditions of urban and rural landscapes was by Spencer Gore painting in Letchworth and showing the impact of industrial activity in an agricultural landscape on the outskirts of the Garden City.

The political upheavals of the twentieth century - world war and revolution – stimulated new schools of painting where the industrial landscape had a particularly significance as a demonstration of a political art agenda. Futurist painters such as Umberto Boccioni used scenes of construction and manual labour to promote their enthusiasm for industry, technology and speed. In Boccioni's words: "all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed." Fernand Leger (1881-1955) explained that the pace of modern life and travel at speed altered the modern man's way of seeing, commenting that "the compression of a modern painting, its variety, its decomposition of forms, are the result of all this". His industrial landscapes break down the chaos of urban spaces into multiple perspectives in cubist form as if seen from a moving viewpoint. (Fig.2, *Industrial Landscape*, Fernand Leger, 1921.)

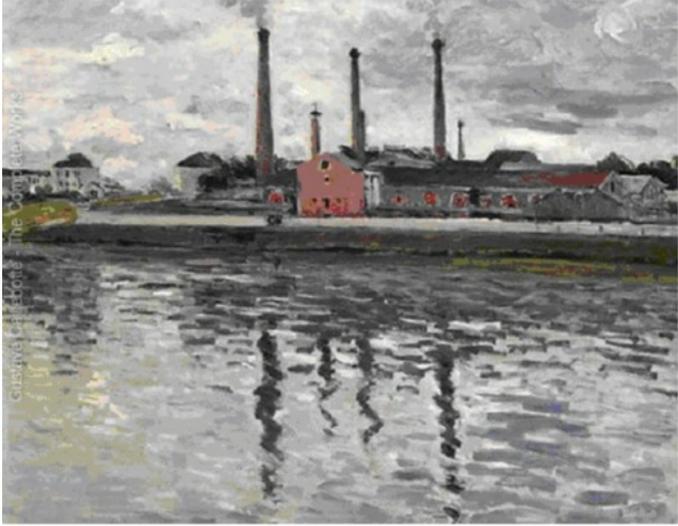


Fig. 1 Gustave Caillebotte, *Factories at Argenteuil*, 1888

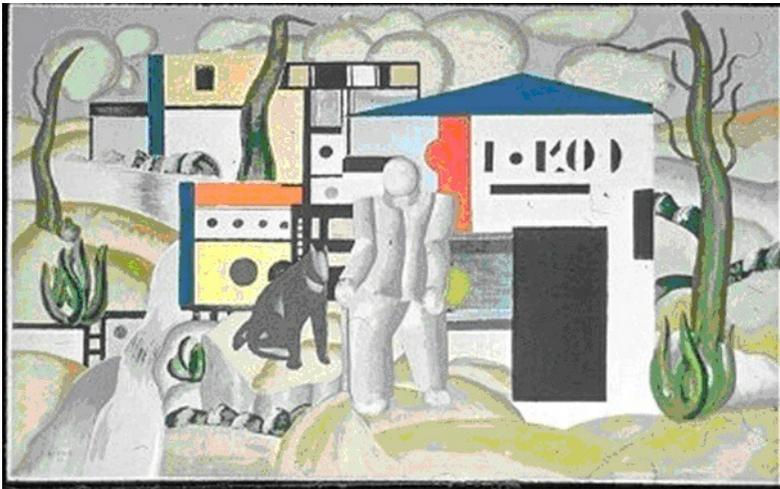


Fig. 2 Fernand Leger, *Industrial Landscape*, 1921



Fig. 3 Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930



Fig. 4 Prunella Clough, *Deserted Gravel Pit*, c. 1946

In America at the same time the impact of large scale industrialisation stimulated a rather different approach to landscape painting – the Precisionists, painting in a very clear and defined style. This drew much on the flat and exact reproduction of photographic technique, exemplified by the photographer and painter Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) (Fig. 3, *American Landscape*, 1930).

In complete contrast was the development of social realism as a political movement, exemplified most famously in post-revolutionary Russia. The emphasis in state sponsored art with its propaganda objective was on the people rather than the landscape, with a very direct simplified style of painting. In Britain on the other hand in the inter-war period a number of strands of social realist art developed without the propaganda element. The Ashington Group (known as the Pitmen Painters) produced a number of artists within the mining communities who were able to depict successfully both the landscape and the realities of work and social life. These were contemporaries of L.S. Lowry, a different kind of social realist who portrayed with passionate commitment the industrial scenes of the Manchester localities where he lived and worked, although his background was originally suburban middle class.

The last part of this seminar, moving on to the post-war period, focus on a time of change, this time the shift to areas of a post-industrial economy. One of the most distinctive artists in this field was Prunella Clough (1919-99), seeing in scenes of disused factories and power stations items such as wire fences and scrap metal with inherently interesting shapes and texture to create the form of her semi-abstract landscapes. She commented that Leger's Futurist paintings of scaffolding showed an optimism about life in cities, whereas she saw in the later twentieth century a more disintegrated and fragmented scene. (Fig.4, *Deserted Gravel Pit*, Prunella Clough, c.1946.) Her restrained style and

subtle tonality contrasts completely with some of the other post-industrial landscapes of the second half of the twentieth century, where the ruins of old industrial buildings are represented in a neo-romantic style, reminiscent of the picturesque liking for ruined churches and castles in landscapes. (This seems to apply particularly to derelict Cornish tin mines, which are so popular as focal points for coastal landscapes.)

My final topic in this vastly wide-ranging seminar is the increasing focus of contemporary landscape artists on the environmental damage of industrialisation. This is a world wide phenomenon, as more recently industrialised countries with a fast pace of development have seen perhaps more severe and dramatic impact on the landscape. I have selected a final image to illustrate this, *Wallerawang Powerstation* by Australian artist Mandy Martin, 2008 (Fig. 5). She writes of her work in the context of John Martin, taking us back to the apocalyptic visionaries of two centuries ago.

In conclusion the industrial landscape has become an established part of the landscape tradition over the last two hundred and fifty years, lending itself to a wide range of social and political movements, and at the same time giving a new dimension to landscape art with new possibilities for subject matter and composition, and different aesthetic perceptions of what is beautiful and worth painting.

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Fig. 5 Mandy Martin, *Wallerawang Powerstation*, 2008