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Landscape and Color: The Legacy of Romanticism

Cover Page Footnote

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Landscape and Color: The Legacy of Romanticism

There is creation in the eye
Nor less in all the other senses; powers
They are that colour, model, and combine
The things perceived with such an absolute
Essential energy that we may say
That those most godlike faculties of ours
At one and the same moment are the mind
And the mind's minister.¹

Eighteenth-century revolutions throughout Europe and America created a wreckage of authority symbols and effectively encouraged political and social innovation, experiment, and invention. With the general decline of religious beliefs maintained by centuries of superstition and medieval faith, the new age, prompted by scientific thought and industrialism, was awakened to a sensibility of the natural world. The sheer presence and variability of natural objects became an expression of the divine, serene order.

In England, observations on the subject of nature, particularly Edmund Burke's essay *The Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) were important in developing an awareness of the characteristics of the natural landscape. If sublimity or beauty can be attributed to natural objects, the word "beautiful" for Burke meant small, pleasurable, attractive, smooth, and light, while "sublime" referred to natural objects of excessive size, rugged, gloomy, and dark. Accordingly, natural objects too irregular to be beautiful and too small to be sublime came to be referred to as "picturesque." Small-scale scenery of a certain intricacy, variety, and contrast was generally accepted as having the raw material for the creation of a mental picture from the elements presented to the eye. This quality of landscape as a ready-made pleasurable "picture" gave rise to topographical or "view" painting in England during the eighteenth century. A complacent picture post-card view of natural surroundings was further encouraged by travellers on the Grand Tour.

In the nineteenth century, the imagination of the Romantic artists transformed the picturesque view of landscape to a more sensitive and personal awareness of nature. Landscape painters and the English Romantic poets who explored the relationship between man and the natural world asserted that the representation of the forms of nature had deep significance. The wonder and wildness of the natural world fueled their imagination, allowing personal visual responses that expressed the ascendancy of emotion over reason.

John Constable (1776-1837) professed an emotional involvement with nature that was intense, having arrived instinctively at the Wordsworthian certainty that dwelling on the variable surface appearance of natural objects would reveal something of the moral grandeur of the universe. He was convinced that the visible world of tree, flower, river, field, and sky was the essential source for an original painter. This certitude became the foundation of his art. Direct studies of his familiar surroundings were tremendously important and served as a help to him in sustaining in the finished work the look and feel of nature. "When I set down to make a sketch from nature," said Constable to his friend, John Fisher, "the first thing I try to do is to forget that I have ever seen a picture."²

Constable was not deeply moved by nature's sublime or dramatic aspects, however; it was the familiar nature of a place with its variety and moods which dominated his imagination. What he discovered was that the ordinary and familiar view released his subjective feelings. He painted landscapes that were bound up with his youth, friendships, and affections, the familiar countryside with which he felt a personal bond, and the places associated with his life. To a greater extent than most painters, Constable's subject matter is a history of his life.

"I should paint my own places best . . . I associate my 'careless boyhood' to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter (and I am grateful)," wrote Constable to John Fisher on October 23, 1821.³ The places along the River Stout were known even during his lifetime as "Constable Country." While Wordsworth and the whole cult of nature were associated with mountains, the flat, undramatic countryside in the south of England played a vital part in stimulating Constable's imagination.

The titles of Constable's paintings reveal clearly the name of the place he depicts, and he makes no attempt to suggest a grand scheme

or an evocative response. Places, activities, and views recall only the lifestyle that was customary and comfortable. *The Stour Valley and Dedham Village, 1814* (Fig. 1), commissioned by the lord of East Bergholt on the occasion of the marriage of a daughter, served as a reminder of a familiar scene of her childhood. The meandering river and Dedham Vale are pictured within the panoramic view of the valley. The scene is one of Constable's most natural views of his native landscape. These domestic scenes of familiar places were enriched by the light that infused the simple landscape. Characteristically, throughout his life Constable displayed an empathy with nature in all its moods, endeavoring to reveal the most transitory qualities of light in his paintings.



Fig. 1. *The Stour Valley and Dedham Church*. 1814-15. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

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Constable captured in paint the vibrancy of air and fashioned fleeting light in its constant renewal of the physical world. In his descriptive paintings, light is molded, incised, through the use of opaque paint applied with direct stabs and strokes. As his brush skimmed the surface, he recorded elusive atmospheric conditions. The broad sharp accents of white by which he sought to convey “the dewey freshness of nature” resulted in a complex layer of paint texture that added a depth and richness to his work.

In his later work, *On the River Stour, 1830-37* (Fig. 2), the more detailed aspects of nature are generalized, and his staccato brushwork is clearly aimed at capturing the emotional essence of the scene. Trees and clouds have lost some of their formal structure, and the feverish movement blurs the realistic images and associations.



Fig. 2. *On the River Stour*. 1830-37. Washington D.C., The Phillips Collection

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In Constable's search for fidelity to appearances, he discovered qualities in nature that were never before painted. By a fresh technique, he made the ordinary appear extraordinary and suggested the Wordsworthian vision of "the passions of man . . . incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature" (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*). His influence on his contemporaries was greater in France than in England, inspiring the Barbizon school of landscape painters in their rendering of the beauty and dignity of the countryside. The observation of light and atmosphere eventually reached a climax in the Impressionist painters' desire to vividly record and convey the nuances of fleeting light. In Constable, as in all the great artists of landscape, the uncommon vision transmitted to canvas enriched and expanded not only subsequent landscape painting but also the viewers' sensibility and response to natural surroundings.

If Constable sought truth and meaning through heightened perception of nature, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) transformed nature into pure sensation through light and color. Turner's response to the visible world was one of force and energy, discovering and revealing in optical sensations a total sense of truth to nature. Having studied traditional methods of recording landscapes, Turner soon discovered that the elemental force of nature could not be conveyed through the conventional schemes currently being used in landscape painting.

His celebrated "vortex" composition, in which the objects and elements became enveloped in a whirling centrifugal mass, is implicit in his first exhibited oil, *Fishermen at Sea* (1796). The fragile boats within a swirling, blackened sea reveal the destructive natural force of wind in its formidable power. To a great extent, this relationship between natural drama and human event remained a dominant concern throughout Turner's career.

After the Napoleonic Wars, Turner began the first of a series of pilgrimages to the Continent. He recorded visually in his memory the glorious natural phenomena of the scenery of the Alps. He witnessed lofty waterfalls enveloped in mist and swirling Alpine storms, for which he later found pictorial equivalents. The first of his true "vortex" compositions, *Snowstorm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (Fig. 3), was based on a violent snowstorm he had observed. Instead of depicting that "epic moment" of history in which Hannibal

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inspired his troops to continue their brave crossing despite the hardships, Turner's composition deals with natural forces alone. The center of the picture is dominated by an elliptical, dark vortex consuming the last light of the sun. In its force, the black, whirling mass of snow allows the remaining light to define the nameless figures that have been caught up like toys in the violence of the storm. With Turner, the historic crossing has been displaced by the elemental powers of nature.



Fig. 3. *Snow Storm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps*. 1812. London, The Tate Gallery.

A fresh experience in Venice, Italy, a place in which reflected and refracted light fills the whole field of vision, inspired some of his earliest essays in pure color. The brightness of the Mediterranean light and his initial training as a watercolorist helped to lighten his palette and begin his explorations with color. In the previous century, academicians had been wary of the more sensual aspects of color. The Romantic painters, particularly Turner, were developing a revolutionary approach to painting by transforming everything into pure color. Instead of proving the reality of objects within a painting by their solidity, Turner moved away from definition and rendered light and feelings about life through color, thereby

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declaring its independence. In a Turner painting, the three-dimensional world illumined by light was suggested by equivalent color sensations.

When Goethe's *Theory of Colors* appeared in an English translation in 1840, Turner annotated and admired the natural philosopher's observation of the optical and subjective qualities of color. In two paintings exhibited in 1843, Turner speculated on the associative and subjective properties of color. In keeping with Goethe's theory, the first painting, *Shade and Darkness: The Evening of the Deluge*, is dominated by the cool tones of the spectrum: blue, blue-green, and purple. These dark tones were negative," producing restless, susceptible, and anxious impressions, as witnessed in the deluge about to descend. In the companion work, *Light and Color: The Morning After the Deluge*, Turner paints God's salvation of Noah in the positive tones of red, yellow, and orange, hues suggesting warmth, gaiety, and happiness (according to Goethe). Agitated figures within a bubble of light refractions substitute for the rainbow as a symbol of God's promise. In visually relating Goethe's theory, Turner subjectively replies that color association, like every other form of perception, is dependent on the attitude, influences, and frame of mind of the observer.

Lines from James Thomson's *The Seasons (Spring)* appeared in an exhibition catalog as a part of a descriptive title for an earlier painting. The lines selected by Turner from the complete work written seventy years before prophesied much of the painter's later development:

. . . in the western sky, the downward sun
 Looks out effulgent from amid the flush
 Of broken clouds, gay-shifting to his beam.
 The rapid radiance instantaneous strikes
 The illumined mountain, through the forest streams,
 Shakes on the floods, and in a yellow mist,
 Far smoking o'er the interminable plain,
 In twinkling myriads lights the dewy gems.
 Moist, bright, and green, the landscape laughs around.
 Full swells the woods; their every music wakes,
 Mixed in wild concert, with the warbling brooks
 Increased, the distant bleatings of the hills,
 The hollow lows responsive from the vales,

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Whence, blending all, the sweetened zephyr springs.
Meantime, refracted from yon eastern cloud,
Bestriding earth, the grand ethereal bow
Shoots up immense; and every hue unfolds . . .⁴

The liberation of Turner's color ("and every hue unfolds") into brilliant color equivalents created a visual impression free of artificiality. Having experimented with every new hue developed during his lifetime, he often overlaid them, allowing the underlayered color to react with the surface layers.

Thomson's "yellow mist" forecasts the absolute passion for that color that is found in most of Turner's later paintings. Yellow for Turner was closest to the light that became the basic theme of his late work. Light and pigment become one and are dissolved into mists of glowing, shimmering color. By focusing so intensely on light as conveyed through pigment and color, many of his late paintings need only the slightest push to become abstract. Yet at his most abstract, Turner arrived at the source of energy and light through color. Objects and figures become mere accents subsumed into emanations of light.

By pioneering the pathway leading to the use of light and color equivalents, Turner arrived at a sense of truth or value as the basis of observation. The explosion and clamor of color from the walls of modern art galleries proclaims the legacy of Turner and the Romantic painters.

Notes

¹William Wordsworth, fragment (1798-99) from a notebook containing the first extant manuscript of "Christabel," in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, vol. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49), 343.

²C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, ed. Johnathan Marne (London: Phaidon Press, 1951), p. 279.

³John Constable, letter to John Fisher, October 23, 1821, in *John Constable's Correspondence*, ed. R.B. Beckett, vol. 6 (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), 78.

⁴Quoted in James Heffernan, *The Recreation of Landscape: A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable, and Turner* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1984), p. 31. See pp. 30-32 for a fuller discussion of Turner's use of these lines from Thomson.