

LANDSCAPES IN BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

TEACHERS' NOTES

Landscape Painting – A Short History

The idea of landscape as a genre of painting is relatively new in historical terms. Until the sixteenth century, landscape remained an accessory art filling in the background of portraits and religious pictures and contributing to their mood. Landscape began with the depiction of objects - trees, houses, hills, etc., and artists gradually learned to observe them more carefully and to delight in them for their own sake. Artists began to view objects in relation to one another, more accurately depicting the broad planes of the landscape and the relative size of things in space.

Flemish and Dutch landscape in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries developed out of direct observation and a love of nature. Artists successfully solved the difficult problem of showing the three zones that make up a landscape, - the foreground, middle distance and far distance, and this enabled them to create an illusion of reality in three-dimensional space on a flat surface. Earlier artists had tried to crowd paintings with detail, treating the far distance as if it were close to the picture plane, and inclining the ground plane towards the viewer.

Gallery 26

Hans Memling c.1433-1494) *Nativity* 1465 shows a contemporary Netherlandish town. The combination of delicate other-worldliness and vivid naturalistic detail is characteristic of C15th Netherlandish painting.

Adrian Isenbrandt (c.1496-1551) *Triptych: Nativity; Adoration of the Magi; Presentation at the Temple*.

Here, the mass of detail, steeply sloping floorline, etc., exploit the physical limitations of the panels to make a pictorial space).

Gradually, however, some understanding of aerial perspective developed, ie. the use of a scale colour to create pictorial depth, the colour diminishing in intensity as the planes of landscape recede into the middle and far distances. Compare the Isenbrandt triptych with that of his less conservative, more up-to-date contemporary, Jan van Scorel (1475-1562) *No 1 i me Tangere with Donors* (1557-61).

Landscape further developed as an independent art form under the influence of the High Renaissance and Mannerist masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Carofalo (1481-1559), *Agony in the Garden* (1524);

Veronese (1487-1553), *The Adoration of the Shepherds*

Although the Bible and Classical mythology still often provided the theme and staffage of figures, animals, etc., the landscape could now occupy the whole picture space.

Gallery 25 - landscapes by Brill, Claude, Dughet.

Individual types of landscape developed: symbolic; fantastic; historic; pastoral; ideal. Gradually the naturalist landscape, composed of separately drawn objects (often used repeatedly in different paintings, set in different locations), became the realist landscape, in which the effects of light and atmosphere were observed, and each element was seen as part of a visual whole.

During the eighteenth century there was a reaction against the classical idealised landscapes of painters such as Claude and Poussin, although their classical style continued in popularity.

Gallery 22

Richard Wilson (1714-1782), *View of Okehampton Castle* (1771-1774).

Wilson generally painted in classical style, but this romantic and melancholy view of picturesque ruins in English scenery accorded with changing fashion. Picturesque, romantic landscape now became sought after.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, artists began to depict qualities of wildness and grandeur as distinct from the idyllic charms of cultivated, park-like scenery. The rationality of the Age of Reason began to be overtaken by the wilder impulses of the Romantic Movement. These changes in landscape style mirrored the turbulent times; the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars and the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Painters were also influenced by the writers of the Romantic Movement; Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Coleridge and others.

The sublime landscapes of artists such as Turner instilled fear and trepidation in the viewer, who seemed to be sucked into a vortex of swirling clouds, tumultuous seas, and storms raging around mountain crags. Rather than controlling and taming the landscape, Man was now at the mercy of the wilder elements of nature.

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), *The Pass of St. Cotthard*.

Nineteenth century painters became even more aware of the immediate and changing aspects of nature as opposed to the permanent and general features

of topography, etc. They recorded the effects of wind and weather; rain and storm were to appear as well as sunshine and calm.

Observations of the effects of varying light, weather and atmospheric conditions upon landscape led to the depiction of moments of flux. Impressionist painter Monet made series of pictures of Rouen Cathedral at different times of day; he also recorded the transient effects of weather upon haystacks, suffused by light and colour.

Gallery 21

The Church at Moret 1894, by Alfred Sisley;

The Bridge at Rotten 1896, by Camille Pissarro.

Cezanne, by contrast, went on to create pictures which explored the underlying structure of landscape and reflected the permanent and immutable aspects of scenery.

Andre Derain (1880-1954) *Landscape near Cagnes*

Landscape artists of the twentieth century have many varied styles; some have returned to the landscape of symbol, where they search for pictorial equivalents of what they have seen and experienced, rather than holding a mirror to nature.