

# PHOTOGRAPHY, PERCEPTION, AND THE LANDSCAPE

*Douglas Nickel*

**In everyday speech, the word “landscape” denotes an area of open outdoor space regarded primarily for its visible aspects. It also refers to a type of picture that depicts such a locality. This seemingly ageless notion—that particular physical features of the land might be appreciated for their aesthetic appeal, independent of their usefulness—turns out to be a fairly modern one, however. For most of the history of literature and art in the West, landscapes, if they appear at all, have served chiefly as settings for stories about humans and their divinities, not as something worthy of attention themselves. It was only between the 17th and 19th centuries, when attitudes toward wilderness, the land, and the functions of art all changed, that the genre of landscape painting as we know it first appeared. Photography’s arrival in the 1840s corresponded to just the moment when this change of attitudes was fully realized, a bit of timing that made the photograph’s emulation of the Romantic landscape seem inexorable and our acceptance of the category seamless. But in fact there is nothing natural or inevitable about the photographic landscape, and if we scratch the surface of the history and aesthetics leading up to it, an abundance of complexities emerges.**

There is of course a long history—dating back to before classical times—that proposed certain natural places as special or sacred. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Paradise is configured as a setting where the first humans lived in full sympathy with nature. Here grew the Tree of Life (which promised immortality) and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (which, in Genesis, results in the forfeiture of eternal life); here humans and beasts could peacefully cohabitate in a state of innocence. But Eden is a garden—that is to say, a sanctuary, a protected place removed from the perils of wild nature. The concept of refuge



**fig. 1** Follower of Perugino *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, ca. 1490/1500, tempera on panel, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$  in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.280

and removal is crucial to early attitudes toward the land. From their very antiquity in Mesopotamia, cities represented civilization; behind their walls city-dwellers sought security from enemies, dangerous wildlife, and the capriciousness of the elements. The garden was civilization's way of idealizing those parts of nature it found benign and agreeable into an essentially distorted, urban take on the rural. Classical writers exalted agriculture through poems about the untroubled rustic lives of shepherds and cowherds, placing such figures (as the Latin poet Virgil did) in the utterly civilized nature of a legendary Arcadia. The stylized landscape encountered in these poems became the *mise-en-scène* for the idyll, a utopian fantasy of a former "golden age" where nature (in the form of shady groves and pastures dotted with shrines to the gods) stood for a political condition far removed in time and space from contemporary urban fact. Depictions of these imaginary scenes made their way into Roman wall paintings as what appear to be populated mythological landscapes, and Virgil's *Georgics* became canonical—required reading for the literate.<sup>1</sup> A dream vision of the pastoral was installed in the Western imagination for the next millennium.

The reality of the countryside was quite different. Until the 18th century the unsettled intervals between cities and towns in Europe and America harbored all kinds of dangers: travelers might be thrown from horses, trapped by storms, frozen, attacked by predatory animals, or set upon by "highwaymen" ready to murder and steal. Swamps, deserted woods, and impassable rivers and mountains signified threat, not respite. The term "wilderness" was at this time equivalent to "wasteland": an inhospitable region outside the law, empty of comfort, and suitable only for the uncivilized, a zone to be avoided or traversed with great caution. It was also that terrible place the guilt-ridden went to do penance. Renaissance paintings of saints in the wilderness typically portray Jerome, John, or Anthony Abbott in or near a cave, living in isolation amongst beasts and barren trees, situated in a landscape where a distant city symbolized the society denied him (see fig. 1).

Given that nature-in-the-raw carried generally negative associations, it is no surprise that pure landscape subjects entered early Western art only rarely. In addition, there lay another obstacle: the legislation of artistic hierarchies mandated by Europe's official academies. The hierarchy of artistic genres—enforced by professional organizations like the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris and the Royal Academy in London—first arose in the late 16th century, a time when most fine art was commissioned by monarchs, the Church, and the aristocracy. These cultured patrons valued erudition, moral allegory, and abstract ideas; they embraced a humanism that considered Man the pinnacle of creation, and found his highest achievement in virtuous thoughts and deeds. Thus, in



**fig. 2** Jacob van Ruisdael *Wheat Fields*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 51<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 14.40.623

literature, the epic was ranked above the lyric, with drama and comic poetry falling below, and in painting, history (including religious themes, mythology, and great secular events) surmounted portraits, scenes of everyday life, and finally landscapes and still lifes, in descending order of edifying human content. History paintings were typically larger, more complex (featuring multiple figures interacting) and showed off the artist's talent for invention; they were often public works, destined for display in churches or civic buildings. The academies held that a talent for copying the exact appearance of things was less important than the ability to give life to a complex thought.

Yet in regions where a different class of patrons prevailed, the hierarchy could be ignored or even overturned. In the Protestant North, for instance, Calvinism essentially ended the market for religious painting by the 17th century. Successful Dutch burghers preferred the "lower" genres of painting because their smaller scale and less pretentious themes better suited their modest homes and because their practical nature inclined them to the real and familiar over the imaginary and ancient. Further, the Netherlands was a country nearly free of dangerous wilderness, but it waged a constant battle to keep the ocean from overwhelming the land. For this reason, the Dutch Republic looked upon its countryside as precious, a vital part of its economy and identity, and hence a good subject for a painting hung above the mantel. It was the Dutch who first coined the term "landscape" (*lantschap*) in the late 16th century to describe a type of picture that featured naturalistic-looking scenery (see fig. 2), and, with their Flemish neighbors, it was they who sponsored the first real flowering of what we today recognize as landscape art.

As other countries moved fitfully to more democratic forms of government, and patronage shifted, academic officialdom began to lose its grip on the hierarchy of figurative art. New wealth from industry in 18th-century England and France corresponded with an increasingly open market for paintings—now more often made on speculation than commission—and unprecedented accommodation to popular taste. The Englishman Thomas Gainsborough plied a trade painting fashionable portraits of the landed gentry and the smart set of London in the middle of the century, but more flexible genre conventions could abide a work like *Mr. and Mrs. Robert Andrews*, ca. 1750, a hybrid Grand Manner portrait where half of the composition is given over to scenery (fig. 3). The couple was married two years before the work was conceived, and their union brought together the two adjoining estates that figure as a background. Over time, Gainsborough gravitated to painting naturalistic rural subjects without any portrait alibi, though these scenes always derived as much from the artist's imagination as from observation. Such works helped



**fig. 3 Thomas Gainsborough** *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, ca. 1750, oil on canvas, 27½×47 in., National Gallery of Art, London, bought with contributions from The Pilgrim Trust, The Art Fund, Associated Television Ltd, and Mr. and Mrs. W. W. Spooner, 1960 NG6301

plant the Dutch idea on British soil. By the end of the century, landscape subjects had come to typify English painting, while in Germany a budding taste for Romantic themes allowed Casper David Friedrich to invent contemplative, allegorical landscapes distinctly inspired by real places and a close observation of nature.

The widespread embrace of landscape imagery at the beginning of the 19th century set the stage for the photographic landscape. But neither could have taken the form they did without specific circumstances in and outside of art. First, wilderness had to acquire its modern, transcendental associations. As the cities of Europe (and, soon enough, the United States) dilated in size in the 1800s, so too did their problems. Poor sanitation and overcrowding resulted in deadly epidemics of cholera and typhus; crime, worker riots, and pollution cast the countryside in an ever more favorable light, as a pleasurable and salubrious alternative to the metropolis. In the late Augustan period, innovative techniques for paving roads and amenities like inns and regular stagecoach service made tourist travel popular; in England, the Napoleonic Wars of the Continent encouraged more local exploration of places like Northern Wales and the Lake District. The physical domestication of nature was accompanied by an intellectual one, as science (then called “natural philosophy”) sought to codify mechanical, observable laws for the way nature worked. If nature could be explained, it could be mastered and manipulated to human ends. Photography’s invention was one proof of this mastery: the sun’s rays and the properties of certain natural compounds could be forced to make optical pictures, letting “nature copy that which nature made,” as it was put at the time.<sup>2</sup> The wilderness that was once seen as hostile now became a place of spiritual renewal and connection with God the Creator, author of the book of nature that science endeavored to interpret.

A new scientific strain is also found in art theory of the late 18th century. The Irish philosopher Edmund Burke inaugurated landscape theory with his 1757 essay “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.” Burke asserted that what we consider “the beautiful” is characterized by symmetry, smoothness, small size, and delicacy. By contrast, the sublime is that which is vast, irregular, obscure, or menacing. Burke was primarily interested in accounting for our emotional responses to phenomena—the beautiful, he argued, derived its appeal from its association with the feminine, which (for many males at least) originates in sexual attraction. The sublime was that which activates fear, flight, and survival responses. In the field, rolling hills, puffy clouds, and calm bodies of water will trigger the former response; large mountains, blasted trees,

precarious boulders, and wild storms tend toward the latter. The essay is noteworthy for stressing that our responses to subjects in pictures are not the same as our responses to those same subjects in the real world: a lightning storm or the black of night might well terrify us if confronted firsthand, but when represented in a painting or a poem, they produce a distinct kind of pleasure. By shifting the framework of landscape aesthetics from the rational to the psychological—and, specifically, to our most primitive emotions—Burke helped catalyze the Romantic view that was soon to follow.

Landscape theory provided a rationale for the centrality of the genre at what then turned out to be the dawn of photography. The Rev. William Gilpin, another British writer, extended Burke’s analysis of aesthetic response to include a third category—the “picturesque.” He characterized the picturesque as “expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture” (hence the name), noting how subjects that were rough, ruinous, and intricate in their variety and texture presented observers with this peculiar beauty without falling into either of Burke’s two categories.<sup>3</sup> Gilpin was an avid tourist, and his theory was spelled out in the pages of the several travel guides to provincial England he published before 1810, illustrated with his own sketches. The purpose of “picturesque travel” was to seek out prospects in the country that were especially pleasing, spots where the elements came together to look like a landscape painting. To facilitate the best viewing experience, such travel guides recommended the use of a small, dark mirror, or “Claude glass,” as an aid. Upon encountering a potentially picturesque vista, users would hold the mirror before them and, with their back turned to the desired scenery, discover in the mirror a reflected image of it, reduced, enframed, and softened in tonality by the tinted glass.<sup>4</sup> The picturesque thus amounted to a significant redefinition of landscape, for it prescribed mentally removing scenery from its surroundings and transforming it into an aesthetic object, into an image. Nature was not an array of objects so much as a visual field, there to be looked at, awaiting the proper visual appropriation and recording that would bring meaning to its chaos. But not all scenery was created equal. While in general the picturesque was something to be found, in those instances where the topography failed to present sufficient balance, variety, and texture, it could be physically rearranged with the removal of trees and other obstructions. Gilpin famously recommended in his *Observation on the River Wye* that the medieval ruins of Tintern Abbey might be made more picturesque with the application of a mallet.<sup>5</sup>

The picturesque took the ends of the classical, imaginary landscape—aesthetic delight—and found them in actual landscape, by proposing the mind be put into a particularly

**fig. 4** William Henry Fox Talbot *Lock Katrine*, plate 12 from the book *Sun Pictures in Scotland*, 1845, salted paper print, plate: 6¼ × 8½ in., courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film

receptive condition for framing and seeing things, a condition of willful scrutiny that went looking for what it knew and wanted.<sup>6</sup> What was invented might be termed “landscape perception”: the graphic reduction of empirical observation to a set of salient formal elements that make a picture. The compositions and subjects of landscape depiction at the end of the 18th century were highly conventionalized, formulaic even, based on recipes inherited from the previous century worked out by Claude Lorraine (after whose effects the Claude glass was named) and Salvatore Rosa. But as techniques like *plein air* sketching were increasingly deployed in their service, the creative potential of these more empirical, less conventional studies was recognized. The second half of the 19th century developed its landscape painting and photography upon a unitary principal—the simultaneity of landscape perception and representation.<sup>7</sup> One need only recall the sketch-like arrangements and shimmering light and color effects in Monet’s poppy fields or Signac’s harbors to see this simultaneity at work. It is not clouds, flowers, or water so much as the artist’s immediate observation of these things that is the subject of the painting.

We might say, then, that photography was born into a pre-existing, albeit incipient, notion of the photographic, one based on conceiving of the world as already containing an infinite number of latent pictorial compositions awaiting discovery by the eye. After photography was introduced, some users did the obvious thing and searched the world for the very same compositions they knew from Western art. William Henry Fox Talbot, the English inventor, was well versed in picturesque theory, so it comes as no surprise that he would seek out picturesque scenes and subjects for his 1845 publication of original photographs titled *Sun Pictures in Scotland* (see fig. 4).<sup>8</sup> The first generation of French photographers likewise avidly pursued Romantic and picturesque motifs—ruins, the trees at Fontainebleau, rustic scenes around Sèvre—which happened to be the haunts of illustrators, printmakers, and the contemporary Barbizon School of landscape painters as well. The picturesque landscape photograph was to endure in perpetuity: Seneca Ray Stoddard, working in upstate New York in the 1880s, crafted landscapes as conventional and painterly as any of the local Hudson River School painters who preceded him in the territory (see fig. 5), and even today Barbara Bosworth can cleverly re-imagine Frederic Church’s grandiose *Niagara* from 1857 (see fig. 6).

But much of the topographic photography that followed the first generation hardly qualifies as “landscape” in these conventional terms. The art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued that the Western exploration photographs of William Bell and Timothy O’Sullivan (see fig. 7), for instance, made on geological surveys in the 1870s, were never intended to



**fig. 5 Seneca Ray Stoddard** *The Adirondacks, Upper Ausable Lake from Borens Bay*, 1887, albumen print, 14 7/8 x 18 7/8 in., RISD Museum: Gift of Professor Barton St. Armand 1988.077

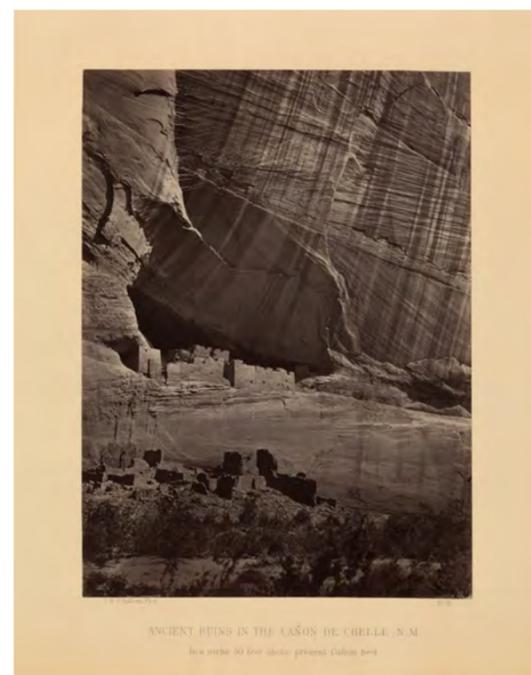
**fig. 6 Barbara Bosworth** *Niagara Falls*, 1986, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in., Private collection



**fig. 7 Timothy O'Sullivan** *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle*, 1873, from the album *Explorations and Surveys West of the 100th Meridian*, albumen prints, mount: 16×20 in., courtesy John Hay Library, Brown University

hang on walls, like art, but were instead conceived to go in albums and the filing cabinets of government archives. She contends that treating such photographs as an anticipation of the formal concerns of modern art represents a distortion of history, that as essentially scientific documents, topographical photographs like O'Sullivan's have no place in the art museum. They were, as the period identified them, "views," not "landscapes."<sup>9</sup> Other scholars, most notably Joel Snyder, have asked whether the practical imperatives of survey work necessarily mean that an O'Sullivan photograph cannot exhibit its own stylistic features and formal coherence. A documentary function should not presume the absence of artistic deliberation; indeed, in Snyder's account, enterprising photographers in the 19th century crafted a patently mechanical, intentionally non-painterly approach to their camera work—optically precise, printed on glossy albumen papers—with the aim of carving out their own aesthetically distinct sector within the overall market for images. What gives most 19th-century photographs their recognizably "photographic" appearance is neither a call to function as neutral documents nor the photographer's ignorance of artistic conventions, but an ambient desire to make the photograph look like a product of technology—a look that stood for industrial progress within a milieu that valued the machine-made over the hand-made. In O'Sullivan's case, his principal task was to provide images that would satisfy the needs of the survey leaders who hired him. Snyder argues that O'Sullivan's radical views were calculated to depict the Western territories as hostile, foreign-looking *terra incognita*, where humans (if present) stand out as isolated from their surroundings.<sup>10</sup> The spare, anti-picturesque solutions he delivered accorded perfectly with interests of professionals making the case that these empty territories be studied, secured, and settled.

An understanding of landscape theory therefore suggests that not every photograph of land is a landscape, and not every landscape necessarily features the land. The standard definition points to places—places in the world, or places seen in pictures—which take on the quality of a thing. But "landscape" is probably better understood as that set of expectations and beliefs—about both the environment and the conventions of its representation—that we project upon the world. These conventions and expectations are subject to historical change and are culturally specific; Talbot's were a traditional set of landscape expectations projected upon his subjects, but O'Sullivan's were radically reconfigured, to the point where they are hardly recognizable by the earlier standard. American landscape



photography in the 20th century and after can be usefully clarified by this notion of projection. Ansel Adams, for instance, insisted upon the purely "photographic" character of his approach, developing an ethos out of what had been the dominant 19th-century entrepreneurial idiom. Like that of others in his f/64 cohort, Adams's work in the 1930s and '40s was strikingly modernist. He stressed the primacy of "visualization": the photographer's ability to see the intended picture first (and at one and the same time) in the world and in their "mind's eye," then in the camera, and finally in the darkroom. In this scheme, the photograph is created mentally before it is realized physically; the photograph here becomes an exercise of the photographer's skill at commuting mental pictures into real ones, a process that honors talent and learned expertise (i.e., properties of the photographer) over chance and automatic recording (properties of the apparatus). Per picturesque theory, this entailed nothing if not the projection of pictorial expectations upon the world.

Yet, in the larger sense, we might ask what notion of landscape Adams overlaid upon his world. He spent his teens and early twenties in Yosemite, sent there by concerned parents as a kind of therapy for his hyperactive disposition and his inattention at school. Throughout his life, Adams embraced the notion that nature could provide the harried, urbanized citizen of the modern age with a place of spiritual refuge, and that the most beautiful natural places should be identified and preserved in the public interest for this very purpose. This was the legacy of Emerson and Thoreau, articulated by John Muir and enshrined in the National Parks Bill of 1890. The same conservationist values informed Adams's landscape photography and his activities on behalf of the environment: a National Park and an Adams photograph establish a border around a particularly inviting piece of terrain, ostensibly banishing from it what is human, allowing us to escape (at least temporarily) the intrusions of culture. Here, as Emerson urged, we might find some connection to a cosmos greater than ourselves; for the reverent Adams, art and wilderness each had the potential to make the individual whole again. Insofar as a National Park is like a garden—a protected, managed, functional container for cultivating a certain conception of nature—Adams's idea returned the viewer to Eden.

But when the premise of the projection is challenged—as it was in the late 1960s and 1970s—an entirely different kind of landscape is the result. Around this time, followers of the ecology movement broke with conservationism, reasoning that the natural environment entails both wilderness areas *and* the vacant lot next door. Pollution, pesticide runoff, the destruction of species, global warming, and rampant development affect every part of the environment, so every part needs stewardship and protection—not just the spectacular

**fig. 8 Lewis Baltz** *Model Home, Shadow Mountain, 1977*, from the portfolio *Nevada*, gelatin silver print, 8×10 in., RISD Museum: Gift from the collection of Joe Deal and Betsy Ruppia 2010.82.35.8

spots. Many of the photographers brought together for the *New Topographics* exhibition of 1975 gravitated more or less independently to a kind of landscape image indicative of this newer attitude, though they did so without overt polemical motives. Perspectives showing roadside litter, industrial parks, highway culture, and recently constructed tract homes (see fig. 8) now inverted the Adams principle of exclusion, turning straight toward human alteration to suggest an end-stage to the paradise that was America. Moreover, the exhibition noted a stylistic strategy common to the group, wherein imagery was seemingly stripped of expressivity in order to assume the appearance of being without style, a “topographic” rendering rather than landscape scenery. The work of 19th-century survey photography was again invoked, not only because of these artists’ emphasis on locations in the American West, but particularly through their anti-Romantic redefinition of what a landscape photograph could be. A view of a generic building in an industrial park hardly shows land at all, let alone a vista; an image of the corner of Second Street and South Main would seem to portray real estate more than scenery. There is no denying that this recalibration of aesthetic expectations toward the social has come to predominate recent practice; however, we must now acknowledge that what gets classified as “landscape” will not follow a set of rules or conventions about subject matter or approach, but must continually evolve, because the projections we make continually incorporate, modify, and reject previous rules and conventions to produce new ones. The process by which we recast our perceptions of the world as representations guarantees that the complexity of landscape will endure as long as people do.

#### NOTES

1. See Nils Büttner, *Landscape Painting: A History* (New York: Abbeville, 2000), 23–31.
2. The phrase is that of J. H. Fitzgibbon, a professional photographer from St. Louis, Missouri, advertising his services in 1852. Quoted in Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 36.
3. William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1802), 17.
4. The camera obscura—precursor to the photographic camera—offered a similar translation of three-dimensional reality to two-dimensional image.
5. William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye and several parts of South Wales, etc. relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the summer of the year 1770* (London: R. Blamire, 1782), 47.
6. In his essay “Nature,” Emerson writes: “The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836), 11.
7. See W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 12.
8. In March 1841, Talbot wrote to his friend Sir John Herschel, “I must now really transport my apparatus to some locality where picturesque objects are to be met with, such as a Cathedral, or a seaport Town, for my own neighbourhood is not particularly suited to the Artist.” Quoted in Elizabeth Knazook, “A Picturesque Photographic Tour Through Scotland,” *Librarian and Staff Publications*, Paper 6 (2009), [http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/library\\_pubs/6](http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/library_pubs/6).
9. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311–19.
10. Joel Snyder, “Territorial Photography,” in Mitchell, 175–201.

