

Geraint Evans – Course Leader MA Painting, Wimbledon College of Arts, University of the Arts London, UK.

Imaging the Rustic and the Wilderness: The landscape sketch in nineteenth century Britain and America.

In 1979 the 'Big Thunder Mountain Railroad' ride opened in Disneyland's Frontierland. This extraordinary simulated mountain landscape at the heart of the ride forms a potent signifier for the American West. Nature, through landscaping had been a significant concern for Disney from the park's opening in 1955 and it echoed the significance of landscape to the nation's cultural identity and historical foundation.

The visitors to Big Thunder would recognise its very particular topography – Utah or Arizona come to mind; the archetypal landscape of the American West. They are exposed to a controlled form of danger – the uncertainty found in the interface between nature and culture. And they also experience a quasi-educational 'encounter' with an American historical narrative – a choreographed form of cultural nostalgia.

This 'encounter' with a simulated, constructed or controlled version of nature has interested me for some time. My interest in the North American landscape began in earnest during a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada in 1994. The mountain landscape around the Banff Centre seemed disorientating and yet familiar, acting as both a cultural sign and later as an aspirational point of wonder for the British suburban protagonists who populate the paintings that I have made since the late 1990's.

The writer Lisa le Favre wrote that the *idea of what landscape should be is bound up with the ways in which it is represented back to us through culture, be it painting, photography, film, literature or television* (le Favre 2000, p. 89) – bound up in archetypes and conventions. I am interested in how artists such as the 19th century British landscape painters such as John Constable and JMW Turner or the American Hudson River School of painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Church shaped our perception of the natural world and how this subsequently led to the development of specific national and cultural signs such as Big Thunder.

The Hudson River School artists travelled widely and utilised sketchbooks and made drawings and oil sketches to record what they found. Church, for example, was an extremely accomplished exponent of the plein-air oil sketch and made hundreds of studies in North and Latin America and in the Middle East. Many more were made at Olana, his home overlooking the Hudson River, New York. His teacher Cole had said of him: *Church has the finest eye for drawing in the World* (Wilton 2013, p. 10). His near contemporary in England, John Constable was himself a consummate exponent of the oil and watercolour sketch and followed in the footsteps of many European and British artists, from Claude Lorrain to Thomas Jones to JMW Turner, who saw the value in sketching out of doors. Like Gainsborough before them Constable and Turner did much to shape the cultural identity of Britain through its landscape.

The use of natural features, such as mountains, rivers, valleys or gorges, as a way of forming and asserting national identity is an enduring strategy. Claudia Bell and John Lyall write that *When other constructions of nation are proving ephemeral or fugitive, the enduring physical presence*

of iconic landscape features is a way of grounding identity (Bell and Lyall 2001, p. 195). The idea of wilderness seems to shape and define the North American mindset and set it apart from a Western European position. Indeed, Jonathan Bordo has described the Western European landscape as a 'witnessed landscape,' which has been marked by the traces of human activity and presence. (Bordo in Mitchell 1994, p. 297).

As United States of America expanded West during the 19th century, artists such as Cole and Church as well as Alfred Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, were active. They had been influenced by the British Romantic movement but as Andrew Wilton writes: *were all born of the urgency they sensed in the life of America ...and...responding to the stimulus of a new world as it unfolded before them* (Wilton 2002, p. 36).

Artists such as Thomas Cole were concerned with developing a new artistic expression, focused on America's natural scenery that broke with the *dependency on the cultural colonialism left behind in the wake of political independence* from the British (Andrews 1999, p. 164). In other words, finding a new approach to landscape painting that rejected the pictorial conventions of the Western European tradition and that were appropriate to the specific topographical and cultural realities of America.

Gathering visual information was crucial to reconnaissance and charting the unknown topography of the West. It also provided opportunities for artists. Samuel Seymour and Titian Ramsay Peale travelled with major Stephen H Long in 1819/20 and Wilton describes the difficulties Seymour faced adapting his European picturesque style to the alien landscape (Wilton 2002, pp. 58-59).

On his expedition up the Missouri in 1832/4 George Catlin made studies of Native Americans. As Tim Barringer points out, his portraits had a paradoxical reading and purpose – both as sympathetic portraits and ethnographical records. These are indigenous people on the verge of extinction or, at the very least, great change (Barringer 2002, p. 50).

In one sense, this illustrates the poignancy of the situation faced by the artists who aimed to depict the West as a wild place. On his trip through Maine to make preparatory drawings for his 1853 painting, *Mount Ktaadn*, Frederick Church accompanied a party of loggers – and in the process of describing the American wilderness, populated by its indigenous peoples, the artists were also ushering in its demise. Indeed, Thomas Cole before him had bemoaned the continent's inevitable deforestation whilst at the same time relishing in the possibility of the rise of great American cities.

Tracie Felker describes the drawings of Thomas Cole in her article, 'First Impressions: Thomas Cole's Drawings of His 1825 Trip up the Hudson River', for the *American Art Journal* as the *stylistic model for the graphic work of the Hudson River School* (Felker 1992, p. 60). Cole made his first excursion along the Hudson River in 1825 and the drawings and notebook that he

produced during this trip forms the basis for Felker's essay. Cole, a largely self-taught artist had almost certainly developed his drawing style by utilising instructional drawing books which were popular in the early part of the nineteenth century. But in 1823, a shift occurred in Cole's approach as he began to work directly from nature, making a series of detailed sketches of trees and rocks, labelling the sheets with the subject's location, the date and even the time of day, evidence of the pragmatism of the approach.

Cole took time to adjust to this methodology and the influence of his instructional 'how to do' book training is evident; however, there are signs of Cole's idiosyncratic approach in works depicting gnarled and spindly branches emanating from the trunks of trees, isolated on the page from their 'spatial context'. Felker points out that the sketching trip of 1825 marked an acceleration in Cole's development. He made 22 landscape drawings and continued to include information such as the time of day, the direction of sunlight or noteworthy topographical features (Felker 1992 p. 70). He also made studies of clouds and the sky which were accompanied by written observations of the weather, position of the sun or the colour of the clouds

Elsewhere, Felker writes that Cole's notebooks contain thoughts about his own professional plans as well as opinions on art itself. Although his written notes were rigorous, his line drawings were becoming looser and simpler as he developed a graphic shorthand. The combination of drawn line and his extensive written notes did produce an effective wealth of information. But this acted as no more than a useful base upon which to develop his final painting compositions. Felker refers to Cole's painting of 1826, 'the Falls of Kaaterskill' to illustrate his methodologies:

His on-site sketch scarcely indicates the empirical phenomena of the scene; he dispenses with individual details by using calligraphic lines that barely cohere as images. The result is a summary of quick impressions, snatches of this and that (Felker 1992 p. 76).

Composition was the key here rather than the depiction of individual detail. The drawings that followed the initial sketch made on-site at Kaaterskill Falls were often executed in materials such as charcoal and crayon and, offered the opportunity to select, edit and develop compositional possibilities emphasising the importance of drawing to the overall development of Cole's final works. It is interesting to note, for example, that Cole removed the Falls' observation platform and its refreshments stand for the final painting, replacing them with the single figure of a native American – in effect restoring the scene to its 'wild' state (Felker 1992 p. 76).

Wilton observes that Cole adapted the examples and conventions of European landscape painting and the Picturesque into 'an entirely American language.' He writes: *We feel when looking at the tumultuously dramatic landscapes of the young Cole that the picturesque was invented for the purpose of making sense of America (Wilton 2002, p. 23).*

English landscape painting emerged during the eighteenth century at a time when the English countryside was going through a radical alteration with the rapid and widespread enclosure of land. Through enclosure, landowners could acquire land for which before, there had been common rights of access for all for activities such as grazing livestock. Open land was divided into a patchwork of fields under single ownership to increase the agricultural yield, which then served the country's expanding towns and cities at the height of the industrial revolution.

During the same period, England's middle classes demonstrated a growing interest in the aesthetics and values of the countryside. This was exemplified by the poetry of John Clare and William Wordsworth; the guidebooks of the Reverend William Gilpin and the paintings of Richard Wilson, Turner, Gainsborough and Constable. It also marked the development of the English landscape garden tradition shaped by Henry Hoare, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Humphry Repton. The social, economic and political realities of the countryside are reflected in the various pictorial approaches to the subject from the outdoor conversation piece to the rustic landscapes of Gainsborough and Constable, whilst the increasingly naturalistic design of the English landscape garden had broader political implications.

The Reverend William Gilpin's illustrated guidebooks published to accompany tours of various parts of the British Isles were produced between 1782 and 1802. Gilpin had developed a method for the appreciation of landscape through the study of artists such as Claude Lorrain and Salvatore Rosa. He proposed that natural scenes should be viewed based on the compositional principals of painting and he travelled widely during the summers of the late 1760s and 1770s, making copious notebooks and sketches to test and develop his theory.

Gilpin's guidebooks were hugely popular, attracting the support of luminaries such as Horace Walpole, Thomas Grey and King George III. However, his drawings and illustrations were criticized for the ways in which they often failed to correspond to the subjects they depicted. In her essay, 'System, Order and Abstraction - English Landscape Drawing around 1795', Ann Bermingham points to William Marshall Craig's critique of Gilpin's drawing style in his drawing guide of 1793: 'An Essay on the Study of Nature in Drawings,' in which he stated that *the object of the pencil is to imitate nature* (Bermingham 1994, p. 88). Craig attacked what Bermingham describes as *Gilpin's tendency to reduce real matter to a system of abstract signs* (Bermingham 1994, p. 89) rather than to literally reflect the scene before him, documenting nature's individual character and variety.

JMW Turner, one of the greatest exponents of English landscape painting, produced countless sketchbooks that recorded the British countryside. He also made drawings and watercolours that were transformed by publishers such as Charles Heath into engravings for books such as 'Picturesque Views of England and Wales' (1826-38) which Elizabeth Helsinger describes as *an ambitious project of national scope* (Helsinger 1994, p. 104).

Helsinger points out that Heath intended the book to be seen in relation to travel literature, to imitate in some way, the experience of touring. Indeed, the drawings were the result of Turner's own tours of the British Isles, dating from approximately 1795. Although the books' subjects would have been recognized by the picturesque tourist, Helsinger argues that these works marked a point of departure from picturesque conventions. For example, rather than adopting the usual low viewpoint, chosen to replicate the awed experience of the viewer in front of an impressive site, Turner employed a range of different viewpoints. The elevated vista of *Force of*

the Tees, Yorkshire (1827) required the viewer to imagine themselves looking down upon the subject from above, as though their feet had left solid ground (Helsing 1994, p. 109).

Helsing also discusses the predominance of figures in the foreground of many of the pictures in 'Picturesque Views of England and Wales'. These were not the expected cast of 'local characters' engaged in day-to-day industrious activities, oblivious to the cultural or natural monuments in their midst. Instead, Turner included a complex range of figures of varying social classes, including the rural poor who were sometimes depicted enjoying a day of leisure whilst taking in the view. Helsing writes that *these drawings depict English landscapes as contested ground* (Helsing 1994, p. 112) raising questions of entitlement, privilege, political suffrage, representation and exclusion.

In the preceding century, the question of privilege in relation to landscape was encapsulated by the outdoor conversation piece, which would typically present a grouping of people - usually the land's owners - within a landscape garden. The informal poses of the figures and their gestures allowed the landed classes to be seen to be 'being themselves' and acting naturally. Here, nature is a sign of the owner's class and privilege and yet nature and the natural signify the values *that legitimises this status and privilege* (Bermingham 1987, pp. 28/29).

Thomas Gainsborough's 'Mr. and Mrs. Robert Andrews' (1750) is perhaps the most well-known example of this genre, however, Ann Bermingham in her book 'Landscape and Ideology' points out some striking differences. For example, rather than a landscape garden, the subjects are located before a working wheat field. They wear informal clothing and Mr. Andrews lounges comfortably against the iron bench on which his wife sits. Bermingham writes that: *Holding a flintlock and accompanied by a pointer, Andrews is the epitome of elegant leisure and moneyed privilege....Quite simply, the Andrews can afford to be themselves* (Bermingham 1987).

The large landscape paintings - the so called 'six-footers' - that John Constable made from 1819 when he exhibited the 'White Horse' at the Royal Academy depict rustic scenes along a four mile stretch of the Stour river from Stratford Mill to Flatford Mill and lock in East Anglia. The river had been turned into a canal in the 1740s, although it still retained a largely 'natural' character, and so every one of the 'six footers' bar one is concerned with the commercial life of the canal and its surrounding countryside. This was a period of great change and turbulence in the English countryside: the industrial revolution was turning the country from an agricultural economy into an industrial one and although the Napoleonic Wars had provided a boom period for the countryside, peace brought economic depression. The living conditions for many agricultural laborers became intolerable and resulted in disorder, food riots and machine breaking. Constable felt a deep connection to the landscape of his youth, but he also benefited from the privileged upbringing of his Mill-owning family.

The Haywain is one of the most recognizable works in the history of British painting. A horse-drawn cart stands in the slow flowing water of the Stour. The cottage on the left-hand side of the painting was rented by a farmer named Willy Lott but owned by Constable's father. In the distance across a meadow, a group of haymakers are at work. It is an image that has been utterly absorbed into the English popular imagination and its seemingly nostalgic description of a pre-industrial English rustic scene has been reproduced countless times on post cards, fridge magnets, jigsaw puzzles, tea towels and posters.

Constable drew upon a range of preliminary sketches such as an oil sketch of Willy Lott's cottage made at some point between 1810-15. He would have also made use of the numerous drawings that he habitually made from nature early in his career. A wonderfully expressive oil sketch, dating from 1820 and measuring a mere 12 x 18cm, establishes the painting's composition in urgent brush strokes. A year later, Constable painted a full-size treatment that blocked in the cottage, canal, wagon, foliage and trees on top of a clearly visible light brown base colour that seems to unify the composition.

Although popularly read as an affectionate rustic scene, John Barrell argues that Constable has fashioned a fantasy of rural social harmony, by turning the laborers into mere 'automata' and by diminishing the figures and their facial expressions so that they almost merge with the surrounding landscape – their backs are turned, their heads are down, or their faces hidden beneath the brims of hats (Barrell 1983).

However, Bermingham proposes a subtler reading of this work. She sees the various tasks represented as fragmented and piecemeal activities without an overall sense of the whole process of production. Constable shows men caught in rural work and a system of production that they neither own nor control. Even the seemingly natural setting can be interpreted as a site of production, defined by the mill, locks and quays of the river. Bermingham writes: *Constable has effectively turned the landscape into a kind of open-air factory...quite as much as it points to a preindustrial fantasy of organic production, it points to a contemporary model of alienated labour – endless anonymous industry indeed* (Bermingham 1987). The six footers marked the passing of the rustic landscape and in their seemingly nostalgic and idealised vision of the English countryside they also articulated its new reality.

Constable was a consummate sketcher in oils, working on canvas, paper or millboard in the lid of his painting box which he would prop on his knees. He developed an ability to record the effects of light and weather and the notes jotted on the back of his numerous cloud studies, made on Hampstead Heath, suggest that Constable was aware of emergent meteorological theory.

In America, Thomas Cole also produced oil sketches, on board or paper, both to make visual notes in the field and as preparatory studies. Cole had been aware of the work of Constable and Turner and met them both in London in 1829. Cole's pupil, Frederick Church produced hundreds of oil sketches, which are exemplary works of their type that illustrate a direct and personal

relationship with the subject. Andrew Wilton makes a comparison between Church and Constable in the way that he would seek *the confirmation of a powerful emotion in the specific appearance of nature* whilst retaining the aim of creating a finished and illusionistic representation of the subject (Wilton 2002 p. 11).

'At the base of the American Falls: Niagara' (1856), a study made for Church's magnificent work of the following year: 'Niagara Falls from the American Side', is a surprisingly gestural, lively work; evidence of Church working with speed and energy, taking time to describe the form of the rocks and indicating the volume of the tumbling water and rising spray with economy. The contrast between this modest but intense sketch and the resultant painting, which was conceived on an epic scale is marked. But both are evident of Church's developing philosophy to describe, in the words of Wilton, *the power of nature manifested in the grandest geographical phenomena. [The work] ... celebrates the glory of America, its unique 'antiquities', which are geographical and natural rather than man-made* (Wilton 2002, p. 29).

Many of Church's sketches were made in and around his home, Olana, above the Hudson Valley, opposite the Catskill Mountains. 'Landscape with Sunset' (c. 1860-70) is a remarkable, luminous work describing an unusual meteorological phenomenon. There is evidence that Church used a ruler to mark out the geometric design which stands in contrast to the scumbling paintwork that economically indicates the topography and scale of the landscape beneath. The range and variety of Church's mark making is also evident in 'Sunset across the Hudson Valley' (1870). Church travelled extensively - to South America, Jamaica and the Arctic, after which he made his remarkable painting 'The Icebergs' in 1861. His first trip to South America in 1853 was inspired by the work of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. In the words of Wilton, *Church...was following in the footsteps of a great scientist, in a spirit of serious enquiry. His studies of what he saw on his travels were thus, as in the case of Constable's sky studies, a form of experiment* (Wilton 2002).

In comparison to Church's small studies his paintings were often spectacular, epic works that were sometimes shown with lavish theatricality. His large work of 1859 'The Heart of the Andes' for example, was installed in a specially lit room of its own, for which visitors were asked to pay an entrance fee. A large complex frame, drapes and potted plants completed the effect whilst viewers were invited to inspect details through specially created viewing tubes and opera glasses. This degree of theatricality was noted by Albert Bierstadt who began to depict the far West following his first trip to the Rocky Mountains with Frederick Lander in 1859. He travelled extensively in the West making countless pencil drawings and oil sketches. However, his large-scale paintings convey an idea of the West rather than an accurate description. As Barringer writes: *Ultimately, Bierstadt's daringly theatrical compositions were held together not by their 'reality effect' in matters of detail, but by the ideological force of vision underpinning them, that of manifest destiny* (Barringer 2002, p. 60).

Wilton describes Cole, Church, Bierstadt and the rest as: *pioneers in the long history of the sublime in America* and it is true to say that they played a crucial role in visualizing American cultural identity through its landscape, which can be traced subsequently through the films of John Ford and the simulated topography of Frontierland. Drawing and sketching were central to these artists' practices and it was drawing that allowed them to engage directly with the landscape and develop their unique visual language.

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