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LANDSCAPE PAINTING

by

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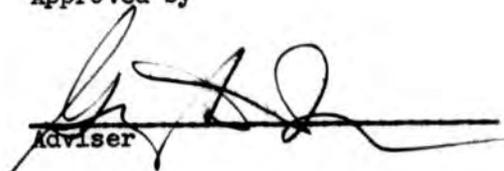

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INTRODUCTION

The artist chose "landscape painting" for a thesis problem as a result of intense study of sunrises and sunsets over a long period of time. The placidness, the darkness, the delicateness, the drabness, the subtleness and terribleness of these morning and evening phenomena intrigued the painter to such a point that an attempt to paint landscapes was inevitable.

Direct observation of nature is essential. One will discover qualities which have never been portrayed before and thus form a personal expression of landscape which is original.

But, if the artist depicted what she had witnessed in these sunsets or sunrises, how could she explain to anyone how she had done so? Edman describes the artist's feeling in these words:

In one sense it is hopeless and futile to discuss painting at all in words. As well might one try to render the experience of a Bach fugue in a logical formula. The specific effect of line, the unique appeal of various combinations of color are precisely what they are and as they are seen. No translation into the medium of words is adequate. The effects of painting are like what the mystic¹ describes as the effects of the vision of God, incommunicable.

However, in this paper, an attempt is made to interpret the paintings and pencil sketches submitted for a thesis. It is almost impossible to clarify by the medium of words what one sees and one's emotional response to what one sees. Words can only suggest in a roundabout way what is actually experienced.

¹Irwin Edman, Arts and the Man (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1939), p. 89.

A picture is a product of man's inspiration. To produce a good painting, there must be a balance between the rational and unconscious. In the creative process, an alchemy takes place, which is a mixture of things seen, the artist's emotions and her need for organization. Many books have been written on the underlying structure of paintings, but the picture always has the last word.

Before going into an analysis of each painting, a brief, general explanation of the entire series of paintings seemed necessary. The artist wished to discuss:

- (a) the value of going direct to nature for inspiration,
- (b) the importance of skies and light in landscape paintings,
- (c) mood and design,
- (d) the function of the sketches, and
- (e) a description of the technical side of the paintings.

GENERAL EXPLANATION OF ENTIRE SERIES OF PAINTINGS

PAINTING FROM NATURE

All of the paintings were painted outdoors in front of the subject matter used for the composition, except one. As a matter of explanation, most of the trees in the paintings are without leaves, as all of the paintings were painted in the early spring of the year.

The importance of going direct to nature for inspiration is cited by John Marin, in "John Marin, by Himself":

Seems to me the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms--Sky, Sea, Mountain, Plain,—and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be a part of these in sympathy. One doesn't get very far without this love, this love to enfold too the relatively little things that grow on the mountain's back. Which if you don't recognize, you don't recognize the mountain.²

And the reason John Constable gave for his fateful decision to leave London in 1802 was:

For the last two years I have been running after pictures, seeking the truth at secondhand. I have not endeavoured to represent nature with the same elevation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performances look like the work of other men. I shall return to Bergholt where I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me. . . . There is room enough for a natural painter.³

When this artist goes direct to nature for inspiration, she finds

²Herbert J. Seligmann (ed.), Letters of John Marin (New York: Privately printed for An American Place, 1931).

³E. V. Lucas, John Constable, the Painter (London: Halton & Truscott Smith, Ltd., 1924), pp. 13-14.

many fresh and lovely aspects, and many combinations of colors and shapes which can be employed in a picture. The panorama is so vast that when she looks in any direction she can find something interesting to paint. Outdoor painting has few limitations as far as subject matter is concerned.

In a letter to his son, Cezanne said: "Here on the banks of the river the motifs are teeming, the same subject seen from a different angle suggests a subject for study of the highest interest, and so varied that I think I could keep myself busy for months without moving from one spot, just by leaning now to the right, now to the left."⁴

Nature is not copied, but interpreted and used as a point of departure. It is interpreted by the artist's emotional response to what he sees. For example, Turner took visual observation as a stimulus and added the greater glory of color out of his imaginative vision.⁵

IMPORTANCE OF SKIES AND LIGHT

Of the nine landscape paintings, four have prominent skies; and in the other five, light played an important part in the picture. Light also played an important part in the still life of pussy willow branches.

On the subject of skies, Constable wrote to his good friend Fisher:

⁴Gerstle Mack, Paul Cezanne (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 389.

⁵Sheldon Cheney, The Story of Modern Art (New York: The Viking Press, 1950), p. 63.

That landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his composition neglects to avail himself of one of his greatest aids. . . . The sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything. . . .⁶

The beauty of the skies in Constable's paintings is readily seen in the color reproductions of Study at Hampstead—Evening, View near Salisbury and Study near the Coast, Brighton—Evening.

The beauty of the sky, and light from the sky affect the colors of natural objects, trees, grass, rocks, earth, and man-made objects, houses and garages. This artist is extremely interested in color; and as she paints outdoors and under the influence of sky, and light coming from the sky, she responds to these forces of nature by projecting them into her picture.

When painting this series of landscapes, it was found that as the picture progressed, if the sky were to be shown, the sky tended to become the most important or striking part of the picture. The beauty and changeableness of the sky attracted the painter almost without her knowing it; and as she struggled to capture some aspect of the sky, the sky took predominance over other details of the landscape. The painter's problem was to depict the sky as a vibrating, penetrable body of air and not a flat, dead shade of blue.

The light from the sky is an important factor. If the sun is shining, some leaves and grass catch the direct light; others glow as light shines through them. A cloud passes over the sun, and the brilliance disappears.

⁶Lucas, op. cit., p. 28.

Not only is the character of the sky affected by the light, but the mood of the landscape as a whole is controlled by light. The general color of all parts of the landscape will be influenced by the light from the sky, so that there is a certain harmony between them that is often sensed rather than clearly seen.

MOOD AND DESIGN

In this series of paintings, it was found that when some mood of the landscape, or some relationship of buildings and trees, or aspect of sunlight had been captured, the design quality was found to have been subconsciously interwoven. The main purpose of this artist was to express something that had interested her or that had captured her imagination, and design helped to do this.

However, true vision sees and recognizes not only beauty, but also the soul of the landscape; that is, it sees the landscape stripped of all nonessentials. This vision is needed if the artist wishes to paint the true mood of the landscape.

Mood and design are so interrelated that sometimes it is hard to tell where mood ends and design begins. Sometimes one is sacrificed at the expense of the other; at other times the two are harmonious.

Through harmonious balance and integration of colors, lines and masses, the artist is trying to convert some aspect of nature into a pictorial composition, interesting to the eye and expressive of her total imaginative reaction to what she has seen, rather than to just what is objectively seen. Thus, design plays an important part.

Color was the element of design the artist was most interested in

using to express her ideas. The method by which the paint was applied--thinly or thickly, by palette knife, or brush, or both--gave contrast, texture and rhythm to her paintings. The whole mood of a painting may be conditioned by the different color combinations used.

The problems of design were of great interest to artists, as is evidenced by the following from Marin:

I can have things that clash. I can have a jolly good fight going on. There is always a fight going on where there are living things. But I must be able to control this fight at will with a Blessed Equilibrium.⁷

In speaking of the function of the artist, Irwin Edman said: "It is one of the chief functions of the artist to render experience arresting by rendering it alive."⁸ It is hoped that this series of landscape paintings have captured a feeling of aliveness that is apparent to the viewer.

FUNCTION OF SKETCHES

Sketching was thought necessary for some of the first pictures. In the actual painting of the landscapes, the sketches were not referred to--the sketches were merely exercises to work out the perspective of the houses and the details of the trees. The sketching was thought of as a part of study, and not an end in itself.

In landscape painting, drawing is usually of secondary importance, color ranking first. However, the character of tree, for example, is as important as the character of eye in the human face. Moreover, drawing

⁷Seligmann, op. cit.

⁸Edman, op. cit., p. 17.

is essential to good workmanship. The charm of a picture often lies in the freshness and brilliancy of brushwork; and this kind of stroke is backed by knowledge of underlying structure.

Drawings help one to get in close touch with nature. This intimacy will help one to guard against the pitfalls of fashion and intellectualism.

In his book, John Marin, the Man and His Work, E. M. Benson explains Marin's desire to understand the laws of nature. In a letter to Stieglitz, Marin graphically stated:

Somehow, well, you are not to forget that robins naturally hop about, they don't walk. Chickens walk, they don't hop. These are little things, yet fundamental to the beast. So it is with boats, so it is with all things. And those old boys, those of real expression, no matter how expressed, didn't make their chickens to hop.⁹

The various uses to which Turner put his sketches is clearly shown in Turner's Sketches and Drawings by A. J. Finberg, and in The History of Turner's Liber Studiorum, also by Finberg.

The eight pencil sketches which were submitted for the thesis in painting have freshness and directness and are the best of many sketches executed. There are two sketches for Painting No. 1, one sketch for Painting No. 3, four sketches for Painting No. 5, and one sketch for Painting No. 6.

⁹E. M. Benson, John Marin, the Man and His Work (New York: J. J. Little and Ives Company, 1935), p. 40.

DESCRIPTION OF TECHNICAL SIDE

The oil paintings were made as permanent as possible by using one of the supports recommended for oil paintings, the proper ground for that support, and oil paints permanent to light and conforming to Commercial Standards CS98-42 of the National Bureau of Standards for artists' oil paints.

All the paintings were painted on 1/8-inch Standard (untempered) Masonite Presdwood which had been prepared as follows:

The smooth side of the Masonite had been completely sanded to insure a proper bond between it and the ground. A glue size was first applied and then two thin coats of white lead over the glue size, the first coat being allowed to dry and sandpapered before the second coat applied. All sides of the panels were filed and the corners rounded, as the ground is less likely to chip off at the edges, if the edges are smoothed.¹⁰

The above method of preparing the Masonite panel for oil painting was recommended by Ralph Mayer, a recognized expert in the field of art materials, in his book, The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques. Ralph Mayer also recommended the support used.

The oil paints used were those considered permanent to light, and most of the oil paints were mechanically ground in pure refined linseed oil and conformed to Commercial Standards CS98-42 of the

¹⁰Ralph Mayer, The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), pp. 274-96.

National Bureau of Standards. A few colors by Lucien Lefebvre-Foinet from Paris, France, which were ground by hand with poppy oil, were used. A few of these colors were found to be much superior in brilliancy of color to those of Weber and Permanent Pigments, which were the colors primarily used in the paintings. However, most of the Lucien Lefebvre-Foinet colors are much more expensive than the Weber or Permanent Pigments.

The artist's palette consisted of the following colors:

Zinc white	Cobalt violet
Ivory black	Ultramarine blue
Zinc yellow	Cobalt blue
Cadmium yellow, light	Green earth
Yellow ochre	Viridian
Cadmium orange	Chromium oxide green
Cadmium red, light	Burnt sienna
Alizarin crimson	Raw umber
	Burnt umber

The manner in which these pictures were painted kept the chemistry simple. The oil paints were used just as they came out of the tube and applied directly to the prepared Masonite panels, either entirely by use of brushes or by use of brushes and palette knife. No complicated mediums, varnishes or dryers were used, and also no linseed oil.

There was no underpainting. And once the colors were put down, they were rarely changed. Sometimes the paint was put on thick with brush or palette knife. At other times, the paint was put on thinly, usually with brushes.

Camille Corot said:

I have noticed that everything that is done straight off is freer and pleasanter, and that one knew how to use happy accident in doing it; but when one repaints, the first harmonious tone is often lost.¹¹

¹¹Marc Lafargue, Corot (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, Limited, 1926), p. 33.

ANALYSIS OF EACH PAINTING

PAINTING NO. 1

This was the first painting in the landscape series. The morning was cold and clear.

The aspect of the scene to be emphasized in the painting was the placement of the houses and garages on the gentle slope of the land. As the painting progressed, the blue sky with white cloud formations became important in the concept of the picture; and by the time the painting was finished, sky and land had become a pictorial unity.

The coldness of the day is reflected in the cool blues and greens primarily used in the picture. Just enough red and purple were employed in the picture to provide relief from the blue and green, but not to take away from the essential coolness of the picture. Parts of the foreground are as free as one would want, but there is some tightness in the painting of the houses and garages. The tightness seemed necessary to keep the houses and garages from coming forward and destroying the feeling of space in the foreground and in the sky. If the houses and garages had been painted more freely, the feeling of space might have been destroyed. This tightness is not evident in the later landscapes. The placement of the large white cloud formation in the picture makes the sky come forward over the land, rather than seem to be just a backdrop for the rest of the picture.

PAINTING NO. 2

This still life was built around lovely pussy willow branches placed against a pale green wall. The still life was painted indoors with the morning light coming from the right from three windows in the room. The effect of the light coming in in this manner is evident in the colors used in the composition.

As the still life was painted indoors, careful attention was paid to the effect of light on the objects. Inside a studio, light can be more carefully controlled than is possible outdoors. The light is always changing outdoors--sometimes the sun is out for awhile, then goes behind a cloud or may be partially obscured by a cloud. As a consequence, the brilliant, intense colors of this still life show a careful adjustment to each other and to the large expanse of more or less neutral background color in the picture. The colors were also manipulated to give the effect of the pussy willow branches projecting out into space. When looking at the picture, one seems to get this impression.

The techniques used in the painting of the pussy willows and the cut glass bowl, although different, are most effective by contrast and bring out the essential character of each item.

PAINTING NO. 3

This painting was painted on a morning which was rather warm for early spring. The sky was a brilliant blue, but partially overcast by a large grey cloud expanse, through which a white sun shone.

The immediate source of inspiration for the painting was the relationship of the large house to the small house. But like Painting No. 1, as the painting progressed, the sky became more dominant, until, in this picture, the sun is the focus of interest. There is a certain simplicity of expression and especially a certain mood of the actual landscape (houses and sky) which has been captured that is not apparent in the other paintings in this landscape series.

Parts of the picture were painted with a brush, but most of the picture was painted with a palette knife. The painting of the sky is particularly effective, because it gives the impression of actual movement of the cloud masses which is in marked contrast to the almost unmoving stillness of the houses and land below.

PAINTING NO. 4

This landscape was painted on a very cold, damp, grey afternoon. The picture was painted because of an interest in the contrast made by the arched branches of hedge against the conglomeration of roof tops to be seen in the background.

After the picture had been painted, it was realized how the weather had affected the colors. As can be seen from looking at the painting, all the colors in the picture are crude and raw. Also, everything in the picture has been greatly simplified, as the greyness of the day seemed to have obscured details.

In spite of the chilling cold, quite a few birds were flying

around. A robin perched on a branch of the hedge, seemed to blend into the picture perfectly and was painted in.

The picture holds together as a unit; and there is an unusual progression in space, achieved by the relationship of the various roof tops.

PAINING NO. 5

This landscape was painted on an extremely windy and cold day. Small pinkish clouds were being blown across an intense blue sky. The picture was painted, because of a desire to portray the individuality and blackness of the trees against that sky.

Most of the details of the actual landscape were purposely eliminated, and the trees stand out in stark simplicity.

By the use of several shades of blue in the sky and the direction of the brush strokes, the sky seems to be over the trees and exerting a force on them, as evidenced by the slight slant to their trunks. The white ground of the picture (though not covered with paint in some places) becomes a part of the total design; and with the other light colors in the picture, offers effective contrast to the black tree trunks. The yellow in the picture is a shrub which blooms in the early spring.

All the paint in this picture was put on thinly with brushes.

PAINTING NO. 6

This landscape was painted on a cold, wintery afternoon. The sun appeared whitish and hardly noticeable in the heavy sky. In this painting, the main desire was to portray the house on the corner and the small house in the background against the dull, yellowish-orange late afternoon sky. The third house was brought in for composition purposes only--to fill in an unforeseen blank space in the picture and to give balance to the picture.

The character of the houses has been captured. And in the painting of the sky, the leaden heaviness of the sky presses down on the houses. Not until after the painting had been completed, did the artist realize how fully a certain restless, bursting vitality in the scene had also been captured.

PAINTING NO. 7

This landscape was painted on a warm, sunny, peaceful morning. At various times in the past year, attempts were made to capture the essential character and relationship of the three small trees shown. This picture captures the essence of the scene more fully than any picture previously painted. The other paintings captured an aspect of the scene, but this picture captures the individuality of the trees more fully, especially the projection of the branches.

Also, there is a feeling of unity in the composition that is not often achieved. Even though probably classified as a realistic painting, the large areas of color dissolve into abstract planes, almost as in a

purely abstract picture.

The subtle blues and oranges convey the peaceful quietness of the scene. And here again, parts of the white ground have been left unpainted and work effectively into the total design.

PAINTING NO. 8

This landscape was painted on a hot, sunny March morning. Interest was focused on capturing the droopy curves of hedge branches ending in clusters of deep red berries. Behind the hedge branches were the contrasting straight stems of cottonwood bushes. In the background, the blackness of the garage opening.

What makes the picture effective is portrayal of the blinding, hot sun shining directly in the eyes of the artist. The sun obliterated some of the outlines of the bushes and the edge of the garage building and brings in the abstract element in the background and foreground. In other places, the picture is realistic.

PAINTING NO. 9

This landscape was painted on a bright, cloudless afternoon. The sun was directly overhead; therefore, few shadows were cast. An attempt was made to portray two small white houses among many trees.

In this landscape painting, all the elements of the composition seemed to fall in place. Colors and shapes were not changed after once put down. The artist could feel the composition taking form. As a consequence, there is a natural freedom of expression and a vitality

that seems to surge up and out of the picture. The color is alive and joyous.

PAINTING NO. 10

This landscape was painted on a warm, sultry grey afternoon, just prior to an approaching thunderstorm. An attempt was made to depict a wide expanse of land with a few trees in the foreground.

The grey sky affected all the colors in the scene and gave an over-all darkness to the landscape. It was such a dull day, even the trees in the foreground blended into the background, making an almost all-over pattern. The few strokes of intense red used on the tree trunks heighten the oppressive feeling that often precedes a downpour of rain. There is more freedom in the brush strokes used in the wide planes of this picture than in any previous picture of the series.

CONCLUSION

Some artists have spent a lifetime on the study of light and its effect on landscape painting. This artist realizes that these few paintings afford only a very limited study. However, this artist tried to observe firsthand the light under different weather conditions and at different times of day, and to depict her emotional reaction to the effect of this light. The craftsman paints the body of nature alone, but the true artist renders the mood of nature, the beautiful body informed by fascinating spirit.¹²

The technique and color employed by the painter in these landscapes required much intensity of concentration to capture the color and mood of the scenes projecting themselves.

If after a reasonable interval of time these same paintings were viewed for the second time, some details would stand out more appreciably than in the first viewing.

The artist, when viewing this series of landscapes, felt that whatever had been learned from struggle and effort in these pictures would be carried over into future pictures with more competence and power.

One is reminded of these words uttered by Constable in his last lecture: "The young painter, who, regardless of present popularity, would leave a name behind him must become the patient pupil of nature."¹³

¹²Birge Harrison, Landscape Painting (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 156.

¹³C. R. Leslie, Memoirs of the Life of John Constable (London: The Phaidon Press, 1951), p. 327.

LIST OF PAINTINGS AND SKETCHES

Painting No. 1

Sketch No. 1
Sketch No. 2

Painting No. 2

Painting No. 3

Sketch No. 3

Painting No. 4

Painting No. 5

Sketch No. 4
Sketch No. 5
Sketch No. 6
Sketch No. 7

Painting No. 6

Sketch No. 8

Painting No. 7

Painting No. 8

Painting No. 9

Painting No. 10

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