

Landscape and artistic development in new worlds

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New Worlds From Old: 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 7 March-17 May, 1998
National Gallery of Victoria Melbourne, 3 June-10 August, 1998
Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut, 12 September-January 12, 1999
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 26 January-18 April 1999

"New Worlds From Old", just concluded at the National Gallery of Victoria and soon on show in the US, is a substantial and engaging collection of nineteenth century American and Australian landscape paintings and prints.

The exhibition spans the years 1791 to 1903, a period that covers the exploration and settlement of the vast American and Australian hinterlands. It provides a record of the role played by landscape painting in the establishment of artistic identity in the new worlds.

On display are over 100 works from the most important American and Australian artists of this period: John Glover, Eugene von Gurard, Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, Winslow Homer and Frederick Remington, to name a few.

The paintings are loosely categorised under five major themes, roughly in chronological order. Paintings in the first section, "Meeting the Land", are from artists who, like the explorers and scientists they often accompanied, faithfully recorded the new and exotic land. It also includes work from American artists who encouraged excursions to wilderness areas and newly-opened tourist destinations. The majority of landscapes from this period follow the style and tradition of contemporary English and European landscapes.

One of the artists featured in this section is William Westall (1781-1850). In 1801 he joined Matthew Flinders' expedition to circumnavigate Australia. Employed as a topographical painter, Westall provides the first artistic records of the Australian coastline, including Cape York in the far north. Although reported to be less than enthusiastic about Australia, his painting, *View of Sir Pellew's Group, Northern Territory, December 1802* (1811), brilliantly captures the intense sunlight of the new continent, a distinguishing feature never fully explored by Australian artists until late in the 19th century.

One of the more important American artists at this time is George Catlin (1796-1872). In 1832, after advice from renowned explorer William Clark, Catlin embarked on the first of his many journeys into the American west. Clark and Meriwether Lewis, President Jefferson's secretary, led the first east-west expedition across America to the Pacific in 1804-6.

Inspired by the philosophical writings of the Enlightenment, in particular Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Catlin was the first American to seriously paint the life, customs and environment of the Plains Indians. Catlin sought to investigate the validity of Rousseau's view that genuine human virtue and morality exists in primitive, propertyless societies.

In his oil painting *Buffaloes in the Salt Meadows, Upper Missouri*

(1851-52), Catlin illustrates the vast expanse of the prairies--miles of wide-open space dotted with thousands of grazing buffalo.

The Plains Indians depended for their livelihood on the buffalo but as American capitalism spread west, they were hired to hunt the buffalo in return for guns, alcohol and other commodities. This destroyed vast numbers of buffalo and ultimately the way of life of the Plains Indians. Catlin passionately opposed this practice:

"Oh insatiable man, is thy avarice such! wouldst thou tear the skin from the back of the last animal of the noble race, and rob thy fellow-man of his meat and for it give him poison!"

(*New Worlds From Old: 19th Century Australian and American Landscape* [Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1998], page 115)

"Claiming the Land", the second theme, includes seven paintings from Australian artist John Glover (1767-1849). The European-trained Glover was 64 when he settled in Van Diemen's Land (renamed Tasmania in 1855). Glover was so prolific that within four years he had produced enough to hold his first London exhibition of Australian landscapes.

Glover's work, like other artists in Australia at that time, was widely reproduced in Britain in an effort to encourage emigration. The panoramic, *Hobart Town, taken from the Garden where I lived* (1832), depicts a small but prospering settlement with the symbols of English life neatly transplanted to Australia--a church, government buildings and the army barracks. As if to reassure his English audience, Glover's garden contains English geraniums and roses alongside exotic Australian flora.

By 1830, when Glover settled in Van Diemen's Land, the vast majority of the Tasmanian Aborigines had either been exterminated by settlers or government shooting parties, or transported to the desolate Flinders Island, in Bass Strait. In Glover's *The Last Muster of the Aborigines at Risdon* (1836), a group of Aboriginal people are depicted around a camp fire, preparing to eat their last hunt before transportation to Flinders Island. This painting, like all of Glover's aboriginal subjects, has a primitive and naive quality. The swirling trunks and branches of the eucalyptus trees appear to rise from the land like protective ancient spirits, the figures passive, the mood melancholic.

American paintings represented in this period include works by Frederic Church (1826-1900) and Thomas Cole (1801-1848). Cole's paintings include: *Scene from the Last of the Mohicans, Cora kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund* (1827); and a *View of the Mountain called the Notch of the White Mountains* (1839). While Cole was regarded by some as the spiritual founder of the wilderness painting, many of his early subjects were confined to the newly opened tourist areas on the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains.

Historic depictions by John Trumbull and other artists of scenes from America's revolutionary war of independence against the British gave way to new artistic styles. National icons were demanded that could compensate for the lack of historic relics, or classical architecture of Europe, Greece and Rome. For this the New World artists turned to the pure and untouched American wilderness with its towering mountains,

endless valleys and wide plains.

Cole's close friend and writer, James Kirke Paulding, declared that a genuine American artist could only be developed: "By freeing himself from a habit of servile imitation; by daring to think and feel, and express his feelings; by dwelling on scenes and events connected with our pride and our affections; by indulging in those peculiarities of thought, feeling and expression which belong to every nation; by borrowing for nature and not from those who disfigure and burlesque her--he may and will in time destroy the ascendancy of foreign taste and elevate his own in the place of them" (*American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987], page 24)

Frederick Church's deeply symbolic *Hooker and Company journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford in 1636* (1846), translates into artistic form the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: that expanding Anglo-Saxon America's culture and institutions across the breadth of the continent was a not just a right, but a sacred duty. Bathed in a spiritual golden glow, Hooker and his congregation are journeying through the wilderness to spread civilisation, liberty and their faith.

"In Awe of the Land", the third theme, brings together some of the most stunning landscapes in the exhibition. By the mid-century the leading American landscape artists, such as Frederic Church, Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) and Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) were associated with the Hudson River School. Their audacious, and in some cases grandiose, work not only captures the overpowering beauty of the new territories, but exudes an intellectual strength, optimism and national self-confidence.

The finest example in this section is without doubt Church's panoramic *Niagara Falls*. First exhibited in 1857 at a Manhattan gallery, it caused a sensation. Thousands flocked to see this new and exciting view of America's most renowned natural wonder. Art critics at home and abroad applauded it as, not only "the finest oil painting on this side of the Atlantic," but the greatest oil painting ever.

Its powerful and dramatic boldness; its unstoppable energy is comparable to Church's striving for scientific detail, precision and reality.

In Australia, Eugene von Gurard (1811-1901) echoed Church's passionate striving to capture the essence of the land. Like Church, von Gurard was influenced by Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist. Humboldt rejected laboratory-based methods in favour of direct observation and experimentation in the field.

Between the mid-1850s and early 1860s von Gurard painted the properties of wealthy farmers in Victoria, the fern gullies of the Dandenong ranges, the mountains in the Grampians and Mt Kosciusko, the coastline at Cape Schanck and the extinct volcano of Tower Hill. Such was the penetrating exactness and vision of von Gurard's work that his painting of *Tower Hill* (1855) was used over 100 years later, in 1961, as a blueprint for the restoration and reforestation program of the area.

The fourth section, "A Landscape of Contemplation," reveals an artistic shift: from wilderness subjects to more pastoral and comfortable landscapes. Instead of spectacular mountain vistas or dramatic valleys or plains, the subjects are more introspective and poetic: meandering country tracks, farmhouse or more commonplace landscapes.

The artist that led this turn in Australia was Louis Buvelot (1814-1888). Buvelot was born in Switzerland and arrived in Australia in 1865. This coincided with the establishment of art schools, regular art exhibitions and the development of serious artistic criticism. The painstaking accuracy of von Gurard's style was giving way to a landscape of emotions, of blurring softness, a new visual lyricism. Buvelot's *Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)* (1869), catches the glowing light, seconds before the sun sinks and darkness dominates. It was this work that inspired Australian novelist Marcus Clarke to write of the "weird melancholy mood" of the Australian bush.

Buvelot, according to Australian artists of the 1880s and 90s, began, "the real painting of Australia."

As Frederick McCubbin later wrote: "Where von Gurard and Chevalier went in search of mountains and waterfalls for their subjects, Buvelot interested himself in the life around him, he sympathized with it and painted it. There was no one before him to point out the way; he possessed therefore in himself the genius to catch and understand the salient living features of this country. In a sense he was a forerunner" (Geoffrey Smith, *Arthur Streeton, 1867-1943* [Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1995], page 13).

The American artists represented in this section are Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), John Kensett (1816-1872) and Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880). In contrast to Church's thunderous *Niagara Falls*, Gifford's *Katerskill Clove* (1862), one of five paintings he made of the same subject between 1850 and 1880, is radiant sunset. The atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

The last section, "The Figure Defines the Landscape", consists of paintings from end of the century. The American frontier was declared closed by the American government in 1890 and in Australia the preparations were being advanced for Federation in 1901.

By the 1890s, the most important and innovative landscape painting in Australia was linked to the Heidelberg school with its artists Tom Roberts (1856-1931), Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917), Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) and Charles Conder (1868-1909). While Heidelberg School artists, like many others around the world, adopted the painting style and techniques of the European impressionists, this school has long been regarded as the first truly national school of painting.

The impressionists' style, palate and concern for light with its differing atmospheric effects, were perfect for the Australian school. Some critics had written that Heidelberg school artists were the first to really capture the intensity of the Australian light. Streeton's *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might* (1896) and Robert's *A Break Away!* (1891) are fine examples, while McCubbin's *Down on his Luck* has a lot to say about the economic difficulties of the period.

American artists featured from this period are Winslow Homer (1836-1910), Thomas Eakin (1844-1916), William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) and Frederick Remington (1861-1909). Unfortunately these outstanding artists--from the realist and impressionist schools--are under-represented in "New Worlds from Old".

Mending the Nets (1881) is the only painting by Thomas Eakin while there are only three by Winslow Homer. Both artists were regarded as the most influential American realist artists of this period. Homer's hypnotic *Maine Coast* (1896) is arguably one of the most audacious seascapes of the 19th century and foreshadows a new era in American painting.

Homer painted a broad range of subjects taken from a lifetime of rich personal experiences--from the Civil war, when he worked for *Harper's* as a visual journalist, to moving portraits of black Americans, children and his many seascapes.

Despite the limited representation of late 19th century American artists, "New Worlds from Old" is a significant exhibition, and one that all serious students of American and Australian artists should attend.



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