

games, mysteries, religious ceremonies, and so forth with anecdotes, traditions, and history of their respective nations. [...]

10 Thomas Cole (1801–1848) from 'Essay on American Scenery'

Cole was the principal figure in the establishment of the Hudson River School of painting. By virtue of his contribution to art, to literature and to the development of aesthetic ideas, he was also a dominant figure in the development of a specifically American form of Romanticism and of an American tradition in painting during the early nineteenth century. The 'Essay on American Scenery' was first published in the *American Monthly Magazine*, no. 1, January 1836, pp. 1–12. Cole opens his argument with an exposition of the civilizing potential of 'rural nature' and of the need for resources of resistance to a 'meagre utilitarianism'. The more interesting aspect of his text, however, is the ground it shares with the passages from Catlin (1b9) and Morse (11b3), and in the connection drawn between the wildness of the American landscape and the vigour of the young republic. Cole acknowledges the absence of those literary and classical associations – 'vestiges of antiquity' – through which meaning and value are traditionally established in old-world landscape. But he is able to claim that American scenery is significant on the one hand of 'the great struggle for freedom' and on the other of the prospect of a secure and democratic future. Like Catlin, however, he cannot remain unaware of the inevitable consequences of the progress of civilization. It is this more pessimistic view of 'the road society has to travel' that sustains the programme of paintings outlined in the letter to his patron cited in 11b3. The essay is reprinted in Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. Marshall Tymn, St Paul, Minnesota: John Colet Press, 1980. The present extracts are taken from pp. 6–8 and 16–17 of that edition.

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There are those who through ignorance or prejudice strive to maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful – that it is rude without picturesqueness, and monotonous without sublimity – that being destitute of those vestiges of antiquity, whose associations so strongly affect the mind, it may not be compared with European scenery. But from whom do these opinions come? From those who have read of European scenery, of Grecian mountains, and Italian skies, and never troubled themselves to look at their own; and from those travelled ones whose eyes were never opened to the beauties of nature until they beheld foreign lands, and when those lands faded from the sight were again closed and for ever; disdainingly to destroy their trans-atlantic impressions by the observation of the less fashionable and unfamed American scenery. Let such persons shut themselves up in their narrow shell of prejudice – I hope they are few, – and the community increasing in intelligence, will know better how to appreciate the treasures of their own country.

I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the old world – that ground which has been the great theatre of human events – those mountains, woods, and streams, made sacred in our minds by heroic deeds and immortal song – over which time and genius have suspended an imperishable halo. No! But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over *this* land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery

is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe. [...] The most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.

It is the most distinctive, because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified – the extensive forests that once overshadowed a great part of it have been felled – rugged mountains have been smoothed, and impetuous rivers turned from their courses to accommodate the tastes and necessities of a dense population – the once tangled wood is now a grassy lawn; the turbulent brook a navigable stream – crags that could not be removed have been crowned with towers, and the rudest valleys tamed by the plough.

And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching: but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator – they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.

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I will now venture a few remarks on what has been considered a grand defect in American scenery – the want of associations, such as arise amid the scenes of the old world.

We have many a spot as umbrageous as Vallombrosa, and as picturesque as the solitudes of Vacluse; but Milton and Petrarch have not hallowed them by their footsteps and immortal verse. He who stands on Mont Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with the gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the West, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, *may* experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man.

Yet American scenes are not destitute of historical and legendary associations – the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock, has its legend, worthy of poet's pen or the painter's pencil. But American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future. Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that secluded valley, begirt with wooded hills – through those enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain, a silver stream winds lingeringly along – here, seeking the green shade of trees – there, glancing in the sunshine: on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers – from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage – no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's offspring – peace, security, and happiness, dwell there, the spirits of the scene. On the margin of that gentle river the village girls may ramble unmolested – and the glad school-boy, with hook and line, pass his bright holiday – those neat dwellings, unpretending to magnificence, are the abodes of plenty, virtue, and refinement. And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower – mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.

... Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made destitute, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The wayside is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement; which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art. This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel; it may lead to refinement in the end, but the traveller who sees the place of rest close at hand, dislikes the road that has so many unnecessary windings.

I will now conclude, in the hope that, though feebly urged, the importance of cultivating a taste for scenery will not be forgotten. Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly. [...]

11 Pietro Selvatico (1803–1880) on Landscape

Born in Padua in 1803, Selvatico was strongly influenced by German Romanticism. His most important work, *Sull'educazione del pittore storico odierno italiano* (On the education of the history painter in contemporary Italy) contrasts the formal training provided by the academies with the type of study undertaken in medieval workshops. Selvatico accepts the conventional elevation of history painting above landscape painting but, as the following extract shows, he attributes an independent value and importance to the depiction of landscape. Landscape possesses its own specific demands and the art of landscape is to be learnt not from the imitation of the Old Masters but through the direct study of nature itself. Indeed, Selvatico recommends the use of non-oil based paints to facilitate the rapid recording of natural effects, and rejects current theories based on the various 'types' of landscape in favour of the notion that artistic 'truth' is to be derived directly from nature as it is found. *Sull'educazione del pittore storico odierno italiano* was published in Padova in 1842. The text of the present extract has been translated for this volume by Olivia Dawson and Jason Gaiger from the version reprinted in Paola Barocchi, *Testimonianze e polemiche figurative in Italia*, Messina and Florence: Casa Editrice G. D' Anna, 1972, pp. 136–8.

'Whoever cannot be an artist, should paint landscapes, fruit or flowers: it is always better, to do something rather than nothing,' concluded Milizia in his article, *Landscape*.¹ With these words he no doubt intended to signify that he did not hold in very high esteem the ability to excel in the art of painting landscapes. It seems to me that teachers of landscape painting do indeed overly exaggerate the difficulty of their art, placing landscape painting almost on the same rank as the highest genre of painting. If you listen to them, you will hear how much importance they attach to their clear skies, to the freshness and naturalness of the foliage on their trees, and to the depiction of water through confident strokes of the paintbrush. They say that to reach perfection in such things it is necessary to possess an exquisite understanding of the real world, a fecund imagination and the ability to enjoy the music of colour with one's eyes. I accept that there are difficulties, and that these are indeed numerous, because it is always difficult to do something well. However, even if exceptional skill is required to become a good landscape painter, much less is required than to become a history

painter. Thus it is that when a history painter wishes to paint a landscape the way lies open in front of him, for he has but to look at the countryside to ensure that he will render it successfully. This is perfectly natural, since someone who can represent man and his passions accurately possesses many more skills than are needed to represent trees, houses and streams in a pleasing manner. However, it is not true, as many believe, that the possession of these skills enables the history painter to dispense with the study from real life of those objects in the countryside which he might wish to put in the background of his paintings. Woe to the many painters who live in this state of arrogant credulity; for they will only be able to offer us landscapes which are completely indeterminate or utterly false. For the history painter to be a good landscapist he must frequently study from nature and, when necessary, return to consult it again. In fact, I would advise him, almost as a respite from other long and arduous tasks, during our joyous festive Italian autumns to go wandering over the knolls and the hills of the countryside and through the gorges of the Alps where the torrents run down the valleys in majestic disorder and where the mountains are reflected in clear lakes. In addition, I suggest that whenever he finds a picturesque view of the countryside he put it into the keep of his sketch book the moment he sees it, without taking the thousands of liberties that painters of landscapes and panoramas are in the habit of introducing into their studies. Within a few years he will have accumulated a precious repertoire which will be of great advantage when he comes to paint a landscape.

Furthermore, in order for these pictorial reminders to record the colour as well as the form of the represented object, I would advise the painter of such sketches to use those boxes of paints mixed with honey and gum which they know how to prepare so well in Paris and London. These paints have certain advantages which oil-based paints or those made of pure gum arabic do not. Painting a landscape with oils involves the considerable labour of having to prepare the palette afresh each time and having to wait for the first application of paint to partially set before being able to continue or finish the painting. It means always having to carry innumerable small containers, as well as oils and paintbrushes. These are tedious and time-consuming, both to take out and set up at the beginning and to clean and put away at the end. Nor is it any easier with the pure gum-based paints. For first, the right amount of each colour has to be laid out in order to make up the desired tint, and secondly, since this type of paint lacks body, a great many layers are needed to attain any intensity in the dark colours. None of these inconveniences are encountered with paints which are ground with honey and gum, for here it is enough simply to pass a wetted paintbrush over one of the tablets and this will pick up a sufficient amount of paint to colour a good stretch of paper. Moreover, these paints have the further advantage of drying quickly and that the tint never appears grainy.

To advise landscape painters and history painters alike to copy their landscapes from nature must seem like telling someone who is hungry: eat if you want to satisfy your hunger, for this is clearly the only way to represent reality successfully. And yet not everyone agrees. It is not a rare thing to see even experienced artists who, wishing to master the correct methods of painting the countryside think they can learn by copying from the lithographs of famous French landscape painters, such as Hubert, Cogniet and many others, seeing in them a wonderful liveliness and spontaneity. In