NEW WORLDS

NEW ART

Landscape painting in all the Americas, a touring exhibition and an inquiry

By Peter John Brownlee, Valeria Piccoli, and Georgiana Uhlyarik

Artistic representation of human interaction with the land has a long history in the Americas. It spans more than thirty thousand years, from the earthworks and pictographs of ancient indigenous cultures, to the land art of the 1960s and 1970s to contemporary photographs of the terrible beauty of environmental destruction. It was during the early years of the nineteenth century, as emerging settler nations across the hemisphere gained and asserted their independence, that landscape painting began to forge a broader vision of the Americas. Artists seeking to respond to and depict distinctive topographies and natural wonders produced unique pictorial representations that nonetheless shared an ideological and aesthetic orientation to the land, as well as artistic techniques for depicting it.
Fig. 5. Baía de Guanabara Vísa da Ilha das Cabras (Guana- 
bar Bay Seen from Snake Is-
land) by Félix-Émile Taunay (1795–1881), 1828. Oil on 
canvas, 26 1/4 by 33 1/2 inches. 
Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São 
Paulo, Brazil. Photograph 
by Sérgio Schadtzer.

Fig. 6. Cartão postal (Postcard) 
by Tanze do Amaral (1866– 
1972), 1929. Signed and 
dated "Tanze 1929" at lower 
right. Oil on canvas, 50 1/4 by 66 1/4 
inches. Private collection; photo-
grah by Remo Fialdini.

Fig. 7. Comparing Frederic 
Edwin Church (1826–1900), 
1855. Signed and dated "F. E. 
Church—at 55" at lower right. 
Oil on canvas, 30 by 78 3/4 
inches. Museum of Fine Arts, 
Houston, purchase with funds 
provided by the Hogg Brothers 
Collection, gift of Ana Hogg, by 
exchange.

Mountains) and palm trees characteristic of the 
region. The jackfruit trees and monkeys also sig-
ify Brasil in this very personal take on a national 
subject.

Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from 
Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic is the first exhibition 
to examine the evolution of the genre from the 
early nineteenth century to the early decades of 
the twentieth century in a hemispheric context. It 
seeks to broaden the understanding of landscape 
painting across the Americas by setting aside 
the confines of national visual traditions and their art 
histories in order to extend scholarly investigation 
and discussion beyond territorial boundaries. 
Expanding the parameters of this inquiry to en-
compase the hemisphere may appear, in retrospect, 
a simple and self-evident strategy. Yet it has proven 
unprecedented in the field, until now.

The hemispheric perspective framed by this 
exhibition and its publication places artists, their 
paintings, and the visual cultures of disparate regions 
and countries in direct conversation, often for the 
first time. This approach has enabled a considera-
tion of the intricately intertwined geographies, cultures, 
and sociopolitical conditions of the peoples, na-
tions, regions, and diasporas of North and South 
America. The inquiry has revealed how the model 
of landscape painting borrowed from European 
precedents produced diverse and singular modes 
of representation in the Americas as artists re-

dponded to specific local and regional, as well as 
economic and political, realities.

While European landscape painting had, for 
centuries, expressed the ideological outlook of 
royalty and, gradually, the landed elite, the pros-
ppect of dispersedly open and available land in 
the Americas shifted the demographics of who 
owned and worked the land, as well as who was 
displaced or evacuated from it. As a result, the 
nature of the imagery that came to represent the 
land evolved significantly. By the mid-nineteenth

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In the 18th and 19th centuries, landscape painting had become a site for the expression of art's autonomy, while, in the Americas, images of the land, revered for their professed accuracy and aesthetic achievement, nevertheless came to symbolize the evolving identities of emerging nations.

A sense of national ownership pervades Ecuadorian artist Rafael Troya's "Companada de la Cordillera Oriental desde la Isla" (View of the Oriental Mountain Range from Tropidales). In the sweep of its panoramic breadth, viewers are invited to identify with the towering volcano at rest. But historically, this identification was slow in coming in Ecuador and in Peru: the mountains were often identified with the indigenous peoples who populated them, and thus considered unsuitable for art. Moreover, and perhaps as one result, landscape painting traditions in the region did not coalesce until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Troya's painting was the culmination of the artist's study of Ecuador's many volcanoes with geologists Alphonse Stübel and Wilhelm Reiss from 1871 to 1874. Like so many painters working in the Americas, Troya's work was guided by both aesthetic theories and scientific principles.

Scientific inquiry and a desire to depict grand, awe-inspiring views of the remotest regions of the Americas led artists to join expeditions of discovery. Several were inspired by the publications of the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, whose famed travels to South America, Mexico, and the United States (1799–1804) provided the source material for his many influential books. According to Humboldt, landscape painters should be able, on one hand, to recognize a location's particular flora and fauna and depict them accurately and, on the other, to synthesize the aesthetic impressions of the scene. Rather than making a "mimetic" image of a location, the artist's aim is to produce an "exemplary" one, the result of a connection between artistic sensibility and scientific knowledge. Traveler-artists Ferdinand Bellermann (see Fig. 6) and Johann Moritz Rugendas of Germany and Frederic Edwin Church of the United States (see Fig. 5) entered Humboldt's path through South America, painting in exquisite, and exacting, scientific detail synthetic views of the topographical wonders of Venezuela, Chile, and Ecuador, respectively. Along with Canadians Paul Kane and William George Richardson Hind, among others, these scientifically minded artists created majestic views of the Americas' unique ecosystems, which range from the dense interior of the tropical rainforest to the icy peaks of the Andes.

Landscape by Thomas Cole, a founding figure of landscape painting in the United States (see Fig. 11), Canada's Joseph Légaré, and Brazil's José Maria de Medeiros reimagine the violent and contested history of territorial expansion as romanticized encounter. In their images, the land itself figures prominently as a character in the development of national myths and symbols; they allude to, but do not fully confront, the expropriation of land from indigenous peoples involved in the establishment and expansion of territorial boundaries. Even grand paintings of waterfalls such as those of Niagara Falls in the North and Iguazu Falls in the South, as painted by Pedro Blanes Viale (Fig. 8) of Uruguay, capture the sublime power of these natural wonders—sacred spaces for both indigenous peoples, settlers, and tourists alike—while also delineating national borders. Centuries of extraction—of fur, timber, fish, precious metals and minerals, rubber, guano, and an array of staple agricultural crops such as tobacco, sugar, coffee, cotton, and cacao—had by the opening decades of the nineteenth century
left their mark on the physical landscape of the Americas, but had not exhausted the continent’s vast resources. Paintings depicting lush forests, cultivated fields, rivers and streams, and plains populated by herds of cattle and sheep vividly document the natural beauty of spaces of extraction and production while emphasizing balance, abundance, and future potential. Framed by European conceptions of land use and ownership and nourished by the pictorial lessons of painters Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, as well as by the aesthetic categories of the picturesque, the beautiful, and the sublime, landscape painting in the Americas glorified and helped to facilitate the extraction of natural resources in pictures that accorded with the aesthetic tastes and the entrepreneurial spirit of the landowning classes. But as seen in Sanford Robinson Gifford’s elegiac Hunter Mountain, Twilight (Fig. 7) there was also a growing recognition of the ecological impact of timbering and other forms of extraction.

By the turn of the century industry’s encroachment on the land became a new subject within landscape painting. José María Velasco’s Citaltepetl, Cathedra de Metepec (Citaltepetl, the Metepec Ravine) (Fig. 9) celebrates the famed railway that linked Mexico City with the port city of Veracruz. Over time, however, the increasingly international artistic vocabulary of modernism animated and enabled very different ways of picturing the land. As industrialization transformed the landscape, painters effectively dismantled nineteenth-century aesthetic and pictorial conventions in the pursuit of a new modernist idiom, to capture the dynamism of technological and social change. Charles Sheeler’s Classic Landscape (Fig. 15), one of a series of works commissioned to document the Ford Motor Company’s famed River Rouge plant, depicts a space devoid of nature but continues to rely on the pictorial codes of landscape painting in its precisionist approach.

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Landscape painting in the early twentieth century was transformed by a newly awakened search for authenticity and pictorial experimentation and thus tended to articulate notions of cultural identity premised on belonging to a particular place. This new communion with nature transformed landscape painting. For artists such as Lawren Harris in Canada, Georgia O’Keeffe in the United States, or Uruguay’s Pedro Figari, it was still critical to experience firsthand, spend considerable time observing, and understand and depict the uniqueness of a place. Yet each of these activities was fundamentally altered. Beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, artists deliberately chose sites determined by their own circumstances and deeply held interests, locations often deemed marginal until they were painted into the national imagination. Intensely local, yet thoroughly national in implication O’Keeffe’s Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico/Out Back of Marie’s II of 1936 (Fig. 14) and Figari’s Puntos en la Pampa (Points on the Pampa) (Fig. 13) of the same year exemplify this tendency. Often, these places became the artists’ homes. Alternatively, symbolic sites such as the coast of Rio de Janeiro, the volcanoes of the Valley of Mexico (Fig. 12), and Arctic icebergs
(fig. 1) were radically reimagined through bold color and striking composition in paintings by Térrea do Amaral, Gerardo Murillo ("Dr. Atl"), and Lawren Harris, respectively. Indeed, while nature and the beauty of the land remained central for many as they sought to understand their place, artists turned their attention inward, drawing on memories and other modes of experience to broaden the observable in the search for the essential truth of being. To know the world was to be fully immersed in nature, to be one with it.

As issues surrounding the construction of nations and sovereign relations continue to invite new thinking that now trends toward the transnational, the hemispheric, and the global, this project places such questions in a broader context. Importantly, Indigenous peoples have benefited from advanced indigenous studies in academia and museums, which have enriched and complicated our understanding of divergent relationships with the land. With a widened scope and an emphasis on cultural dialogue—on the dialogue between paintings and traditions, and between scholars of them—this exhibition and publication offer a much-needed overview of landscape painting in the Americas. We hope that our inquiry is the catalyst for many new and productive collaborations.

These days, the notion of national identity is fractured, unrooted, and dispersed. It is also being challenged by a growing indigenous resurgence across the hemisphere. The deep forests of the Pacific Coast and the Amazon region continue to generate pride and a sense of belonging at the same time as they rapidly and irreversibly disappear. And yet the land persists in being logged, industrialized, at the core of our cultural identities, which are defined by a collective search to understand where and why we are. In our "tasting" of nature, symbolically, through painting and literally by harnessing and exploiting its riches, we construct a fantasy of the land as pure, primordial, and immemorial, which contrasts sharply with the urban, industrial, and multicultural reality of our times, landscape painting continues to speak to issues that are still very pertinent to our respective nations: land remains fundamentally about resources, ecology, and indigenous rights and confrontation, as well as collaboration and innovation. These paintings have the capacity to bring us together around such issues; as, after all, we share the land mass that has generated so much wealth, conflict, and cultural meaning over the centuries. It is a place that we all call home.

PETER JOHN BROWNLEE, VALERIA PICCOLI, and GEORGIANA THIVARIE are the curators of Painting the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierras del Fuego to the Arctic and the editors of the exhibition catalogue, published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese editions.