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The Eternal Horizon: Landscapes from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

Daphne A. Deeds

Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

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THE ETERNAL HORIZON
Landscapes from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
THE ETERNAL HORIZON



George Henry Bogert
1864-1944
Sunset
n.d., oil on canvas
22 x 30 in.
UNL-Gift of
Mr. & Mrs. Thomas
C. Woods
1953.U-131



Arthur B. Davies
1862-1928
Moonlight Sonata
c. 1890, oil on board
4 1/2 x 8 5/8 in.
NAA-Gift
of JoAnn Kimball
in memory of
Curtis Kimball Jr.
1979.N-655

Gary Bowling
1948-
*Minnesota Farm,
Puffy Clouds*
1986, oil on canvas
24 x 31 in.
UNL-Olga N.
Sheldon Collector
1986.U-4001



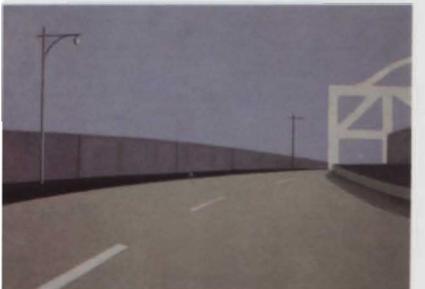
Lyonel Feininger
1871-1956
Brooding Sky
1946, watercolor
on paper
12 3/8 x 18 3/4 in.
UNL-Sheldon Bequest
1950.U-111

William Bradford
1823-1892
*Seascape,
Cliffs at Sunset*
n.d., oil on board
9 x 14 in.
Loaned by
Carl Rohman
1988.L-250-88



Alan Gussow
1931-
Terrace in the Sun
n.d., oil on panel
9 5/8 x 13 in.
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon
Collection
1973.U-3290

Ralston Crawford
1906-1978
Easthampton Bridge
1940, oil on canvas
16 x 22 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1965.H-954



Marsden Hartley
1877-1943
*Altar Boulder,
Dogtown*
1931, oil on board
18 x 24 1/8 in.
UNL-Bequest of
Bertha Schaefer
1971.U-821

Jasper Francis Cropsey
1823-1900
Downe Castle
1848, oil on canvas
14 x 21 in.
NAA-Gift of
Mr. & Mrs. Frank H.
Woods, in memory of
Nelia Cochrane Quick
1959.N-116



Childe Hassam
1859-1935
Gloucester Harbor
1894, oil on canvas
13 3/8 x 25 1/4 in.
NAA-Thomas C.
Woods Memorial
Collection
1968.N-193

THE ETERNAL HORIZON: LANDSCAPES FROM THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

PREFACE

Since man first gazed into the distance, landscape has defined us. The vertical human form measured against the horizontal earth are the most constant coordinates by which we secure the human condition. Standing on the earth man surveys the world, and applies meaning to the expanse.

The enormous subject of landscape can be comprehended on many levels. Landscape can be a literal reference to a specific place; it can suggest an ideal location, offering an alternative to a flawed world. Landscape refers to historical or mythological locales, or it can transcend the particular to become a metaphor for human aspirations and fears.

In our daily lives, the curvature of the earth and our accommodating vision conspire to render the horizon immutable. But in spite of its familiarity and seeming permanence, landscape is in many ways illusory. The horizon, like the transitory nature of life itself, is a temporary condition, created by the union of light and our perceptions of the global earth. But our trust in that meeting of land and sky is only as real as our beliefs.

In the twentieth century, landscape can assume both representational and abstract forms, and thus we can discover a full range of emotional and intellectual concepts in the traditional genre. These twenty landscapes traverse the history of American art history, offering the viewer a synopsis of this most favorite and lasting theme. From these artists' visions we can return to the local vista with renewed appreciation for the eternal verities nature reveals to the observant.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Curator/Assistant Director

It is significant that the earliest recorded historical documentation of landscape, as such, occurred in the same quarter century as the Europeans' discovery of the New World. In 1494 the German painter and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer, produced watercolor landscapes, probably on site, in single sittings. Even though Renaissance characteristics such as new techniques in the handling of light, atmospheric perspective and space are present in his work, Dürer's watercolor sketches of pure landscapes did not influence the art of his time. It was another German, Albrecht Altdorfer, who "is credited with the first pure landscapes--both in painting and in prints. Altdorfer etched a series of nine landscapes between 1517 and 1520..."¹ Altdorfer's singular point of perspective both in his paintings and this series of etchings places the horizon uncharacteristically low. It was during this time, and by these members of the Danube School in southwestern Germany, that landscape painting was first treated as an independent genre. However, not until the early years of the 19th century did America claim the landscape tradition.

Webster defines landscape painting as a "picture representing a section of natural, inland scenery, as of prairie, woodland, mountains, etc." Taken quite literally, then, it is no surprise that until the 1800s most landscapes were merely scenes that served as background for subjects of an historical nature. For example, historian Kenneth Clark states that "...the mountains of Gothic landscape remain unreal (because) medieval man did not explore them." Clark also informs us that the "landscape of fact," or the landscape of 17th century Holland "directly influenced, or even created nineteenth-century vision..."² The straightforward, naturalistic approach by the 17th century Dutch artists who concentrated on the peace and quiet of the Dutch countryside, such as Jacob

van Ruisdael and his student, Meindert Hobbema, provided the influence that eventually dominated 19th-century landscape painting.³ The Dutch artists also are credited with having created the first easel paintings that allowed for small renderings of the landscape to be shown in private homes. In the mid-17th century, Nicolas Poussin, often considered the most important French painter of his century, followed the traditions of recording ancient, classical concepts. Painters influenced by Poussin favored a classic linearity as opposed to the subtleties of color. However, Poussin's contemporary, French landscape painter Claude Lorraine, favored the ideal, or pastoral tradition that emphasizes light and atmospheric qualities. Known as 'Claudian,' this approach influenced the picturesque beauty of the painters of the 17th through the 19th centuries, especially the English painters Joseph William Mallord Turner and Richard Wilson.

John Constable, the English landscape painter of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is known to have copied the works of Claude Lorraine. Constable rebelled against the painting styles of his time and concentrated on the constantly changing effects of light and atmospheric conditions. His influence is seen in the idealized works of the Barbizon School in France--where the landscape is an 'unadorned' subject. Also working in the mid-19th century was the realistic painter, Gustave Courbet, whose subjects included the landscape. Courbet's visual attitude, controversial for the time, was to paint realistically what one saw, and thus was consistent with Constable's philosophy, stated in the phrase, "I never saw an ugly thing in my life!"⁴ Courbet's vision of nature was different--less idealized--than that of the Barbizon painters, and that vision was a major factor in changing the course of art.

Courbet and the Barbizon

landscape painters who worked in Fontainebleau paved the way for the Impressionists of the 1870s. And, it was certainly those Impressionists who changed the concept of not only landscape, but all painting for generations to come. In the words of Monet, the impressionist landscape is "a spontaneous work rather than a calculated one," as exemplified by the repeated attempts by Impressionist artists to capture the transitional effects of light. Simultaneous with the Barbizon influence in France, American painters such as Homer Dodge Martin were recording 'transitional' landscapes in the time period between those of the Hudson River School in the 1820s and the Impressionists in the mid-1870s. These painters--Martin and his French Barbizon counterparts--related a "sensitivity to atmosphere (that) identifies an essentially Modernist point of view, an openness to sensory suggestion, a willingness to let the brush define on its own terms the character of the experience."⁵

In America, landscapes by Thomas Cole in 1825 signaled a time for artists "suddenly able to see the American land as an independent subject matter offering a wide variety of natural forms."⁶ Cole, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Doughty, and Frederick Edwin Church all traveled with surveying expeditions, or traders, painting romantic, grandiose interpretations of the natural environment so new and wondrous to them. Those painters, who became known as members of the Hudson River School, responded to the 'call of the land' as a new generation of artists who recorded the entire development of the frontier. Cole's work personifies the prevailing attitude in that American moment when the role of the human was 'sublime' to the awesomeness of the natural landscape by which it was surrounded. And, additionally, that vast awesomeness "reminded one of the power of God."⁷

Jasper Francis Cropsey,

Keith Jacobshagen
1941-
Towards Bennet
1990, monotype, color
19 3/4 x 15 5/8 in.
UNL-Mercedes A.
Augustine Fund
1990.U-4263



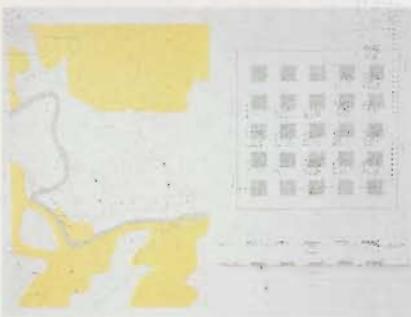
Jean Jones
1905-
Corn
1959, oil on masonite
5 7/8 x 8 7/8 in.
UNL-Howard S.
Wilson Memorial
Collection
1982.U-3117



Victor Landweber
1943-
Light Smog,
Downtown Los Angeles
1984, ektacolor plus
20 x 16 in.
UNL-Olga N.
Sheldon Acquisition
Trust
1987.U-3957



Robert Morris
1931-
Earth Projects,
Hedges & Gravel
1969, lithograph
19 7/8 x 27 7/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1989.H-2888.9



ON THE COVER

John Spence
1943-
West of Denton, Seward County,
NE, April 10, 1988
1988, cibachrome
20 x 24 3/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1989.H-2899



Charles Rain
1911-1985
Imperial Dusk
1966, oil on panel
15 x 24 in.
UNL-Bequest of
the artist
1985.U-3811

Sam Richardson
1934-
Lake in the Mountains
is Frozen after the Snow
1968, fiberglass, plastic,
lacquer
12 x 13 x 13 in.
NAA-Gift of
Mr. & Mrs. Louis Sosland
1968.N-346



Kay Sage
1898-1963
This is Another Day
1949, oil on canvas
24 x 20 in.
UNL-Gift of
the artist's estate
1963.U-474



Wayne Thiebaud
1920-
Silver Landscape
1971, serigraph, 3 color
21 5/8 x 21 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1972.H-2795



Guy Wiggins
1883-1962
Early April
(Spring Woods)
n.d., oil on canvas
20 x 24 in.
UNL-Bequest of
Mr. & Mrs. F.M. Hall
1928.H-96



represented in the current exhibition, was a second generation member of the Hudson River School. Cropsey is unusual in that he is the only artist of that school known to have painted primarily autumnal scenes.

Doune Castle, a rendering of what is "considered one of the grandest relics of Scottish baronial architecture, and the site where the hero of Sir Walter Scott's novel *Waverly* was confined by the Highlanders,"⁸ was painted during a trip to Europe, shortly after the artist's marriage in 1847, when he was only 25 years of age. The warm, earth colors used in the painting are in keeping with the religious nature of his personal experiences, and indicate his affinity with the fall as a time when the "foliage is all aglow with color and the atmosphere is mellow, and tender, and refreshing."⁹ The work also clearly reveals his architectural training.

Executing landscapes, and cityscapes, in the Impressionist tradition was Guy Wiggins. His *Early April* is undated, but characteristically depicts a favorite subject, and in his favorite location--Lyme, Connecticut. The work undoubtedly was painted during the time period after the European Impressionists, but before the true tenets of Modernism were understood in America. True to the style of the American Impressionists, Wiggins' painting reflects his personal response to this art movement.

Arthur B. Davies' *Moonlight Sonata*, c. 1890, is from a series of eight small works he painted in a notebook to illustrate Beethoven's composition of the same title. During that year he traveled up the Hudson River to a small town near his birthplace, Utica, New York. There, he wrote to his fiancée, he "witnessed an effect of moonlight, in which the color of objects could be distinctly seen. I watched it from a hammock until I fell asleep and then woke up again and got saturated with the dream... The moonrise was one of those cheese like colors in a lavender sky, with very warm color in ground."¹⁰ As the series title

suggests, each of the small pieces in it describes "the mystical merging of his desire for affection with his feeling about the natural landscape," in Davies' own inimitable, impressionistic style.¹¹

Any explication of landscape painting would be incomplete without reference to the 'father of modernism,' the French painter, Paul Cézanne. Cézanne's struggle--especially as it related to his perception of the landscape in the late 1870s--was to bring together reality and abstraction through the use of pure colors, superimposed side by side, in what Kenneth Clark terms a "return to order." Whether it be landscape, still life or portraiture, Cézanne's influence on 20th-century art was profound.

With the beginning of the 20th century, we see a shift from the 19th century truism of nature as dogma, when the landscape was the dominating motive in art, to a diversity of movements and styles. Additionally, the changes brought about by technology and urbanization, and an erosion of the natural environment because of the domestication of the land, made an impact on each personal interpretation of 'the landscape.'

Altar Boulder, Dogtown of 1931 by Marsden Hartley characterizes that artist's sense of nature as untamed, rough and blunt. A leading modernist, and a member of the Stieglitz Circle, Hartley's body of work has been represented in each of the three previous touring exhibitions from the Sheldon Gallery, and clearly demonstrates the various extreme stylistic changes experienced by the artist. The broad brush strokes of this work and the recurring use of large, linear areas of black, combined with the starkly contrasting white of the subject matter completely filling the space, defines the new concepts taking place in the American landscapes of the 1930s.

Personal interpretation is further evident in the geometric abstraction of 1940 by Ralston Crawford. It addresses the artist's perception of the landscape through the use of pure form and color in the new modernist tradition. Lyonel

Feininger's 1940s watercolor rendering of one of his favorite subjects, the sea, illustrates the influence of his European introduction to Cubism. A moment with the concepts of Surrealism is captured in the 1949 work by Kay Sage in which architectural structures are presented in an imaginary, dreamlike manner characteristic of the fantastic--mixing the real with the unreal.

An unusual work included in the exhibition of landscapes, a genre often reserved for painting, is the 1968 sculpture by Sam Richardson. This work is not only an artist's conception of the landscape, but the complete three-dimensionality of it is to be examined as a cross-section of the land.

While California painter Wayne Thiebaud's work appears realistic to the casual eye, the serigraph exhibited illustrates an affinity with other landscape painters--Bierstadt in particular--whose landscapes are composed of scenes from his memory, and suggest a sense of the viewer having been there before.

That same feeling of familiarity with the landscape is evident in the monotype by the Nebraska painter Keith Jacobshagen. While Thiebaud's work has about it an air of expectant energy resulting from his urban perspective, Jacobshagen "feels an excitement in the idea that the artist, in painting a scene of farmland, is essentially doing the same thing that the farmer is doing--he's 'inventing' the land himself."¹²

The inclusion of photographic works in this survey of **The Eternal Horizon** speaks to the acceptance of this fairly recent form of artistic expression. The most contemporary of the photographs in the exhibition is *West of Denton, Seward County*, a cibachrome photograph by Nebraskan John Spence. Though formal in nature, and representationally realistic, Spence's work is highly charged with what can be termed a 'personal visualization.'

Collectively, these interpretations of the landscape present a summary of the 'horizon'--eternal in the mind and eye of the

viewer--as that significant moment when, as in escape from the confines of urban existence, one has a special, private, inexplicable experience with nature. The exhibition is of particular relevance within the context of the profound relationship with the land that is an inherent consideration of every native Nebraskan's perspective. That eternal horizon--the landscape--continues to be, as it has been for centuries past, a major source of inspiration in this century, and undoubtedly will be for artists into the distant future.

Karen O. Janovy
Education Coordinator

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- 2,3,4. Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art* (New York: Harper & Row), 1976, p. 59, p. 164
- 5 & 7. *The American Painting Collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*. Compiled and Edited by Norman A. Geske and Karen O. Janovy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 1989, p. 124, p. 28
- 6,9,10,11. Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place, The Artist and the American Land* (New York: Saturday Review Press), n.d., p. 28, p. 43, p. 130
8. *An Unprejudiced Eye: The Drawings of Jasper F. Cropsey*, The Hudson River Museum, 1979, p. 20
12. ArtToday/WINTER, 1987-88, n.p.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Eternal Horizon: Landscapes from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, was selected and organized by Daphne Anderson Deeds, Curator/Assistant Director of the Sheldon Gallery. Ms. Deeds was assisted by fellow staff members, Karen Janovy, Education Coordinator; Janice Roberts, Community Programs Coordinator; Karen Williams, Secretary to the Curator/Assistant Director; and Gregg Lanik, Assistant Preparator for the Statewide Touring Exhibitions Program.

The Eternal Horizon is the Sheldon Gallery's fourth annual statewide touring exhibition. The 1990-91 statewide touring exhibition program has been sponsored by the Statewide Council of the Nebraska Art Association.

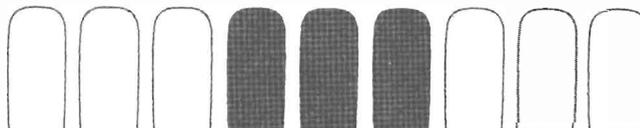
Additional support has been provided by the Cooper Foundation, the Nebraska Arts Council, the Theodore G. Baldwin Foundation, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension and Service Council.

These generous organizations have collaborated with the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to make the museum's exceptional collection of American art available to all the citizens of Nebraska.

The Eternal Horizon will circulate to ten Nebraska communities from September 1990 to June 1991.



Nebraska Arts Council



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THE NEBRASKA ART ASSOCIATION
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
12TH AND R STREET, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68588-0300