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Town and Country: The Landscape in American Art

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TOWN & COUNTRY:
The Landscape in American Art



Sixteenth Annual Statewide Exhibition
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
and Sculpture Garden
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
2002-2003

TOWN & COUNTRY: The Landscape in American Art

The subject of *Town and Country: Landscape in American Art* seems an appropriate topic particularly in Nebraska where the land plays an integral part in defining our identity. The geography provides us physical sustenance as well as aesthetic nourishment. There is a closeness to the land that is perhaps even more evident in the plains than anywhere else on earth.

Landscape painting became a significant form of artistic expression in the 19th century. No longer merely the idealized backdrop for religious, classical or allegorical subjects, landscape itself became the topic of concentration. The British artist John Constable (1776-1837) and other landscape painters of his generation are credited for raising the regard for landscape art by portraying, with keen observation and skill, their immediate surroundings. This development contributed to radical changes in art. Through their constant study of nature, artists moved away from purely descriptive depictions towards accounts of personal visual experiences.^[1] Modernization and the changes that occurred as a result of development and expansion, have spurred further interest and reaction towards the landscape. The works in *Town and Country: Landscape in American Art* present the varying ways artists respond to their surroundings as they continue to explore and search for their place within them.

Throughout history the human relationship with nature has oscillated between reverence and dominance. Using landscape as a metaphor, Eugene Savage perhaps makes reference to this dichotomy in his landscape painting titled *Almighty Spring*. Like the Italian miniature painters who influenced his work, Savage's mural-like painting places The Virgin Mary and Jesus in a prominent foreground position. He then digresses and includes a landscape that does not simply act

as a backdrop but fills the painting with the color and shapes of spring. Mary's form mimics nature's shapes and the veil she wears melds into the nearby rock formations, so much so that viewers are less certain which of the two subjects is given greater importance. Even the title Savage gives his work makes reference to the interrelationship of the figures and the land.

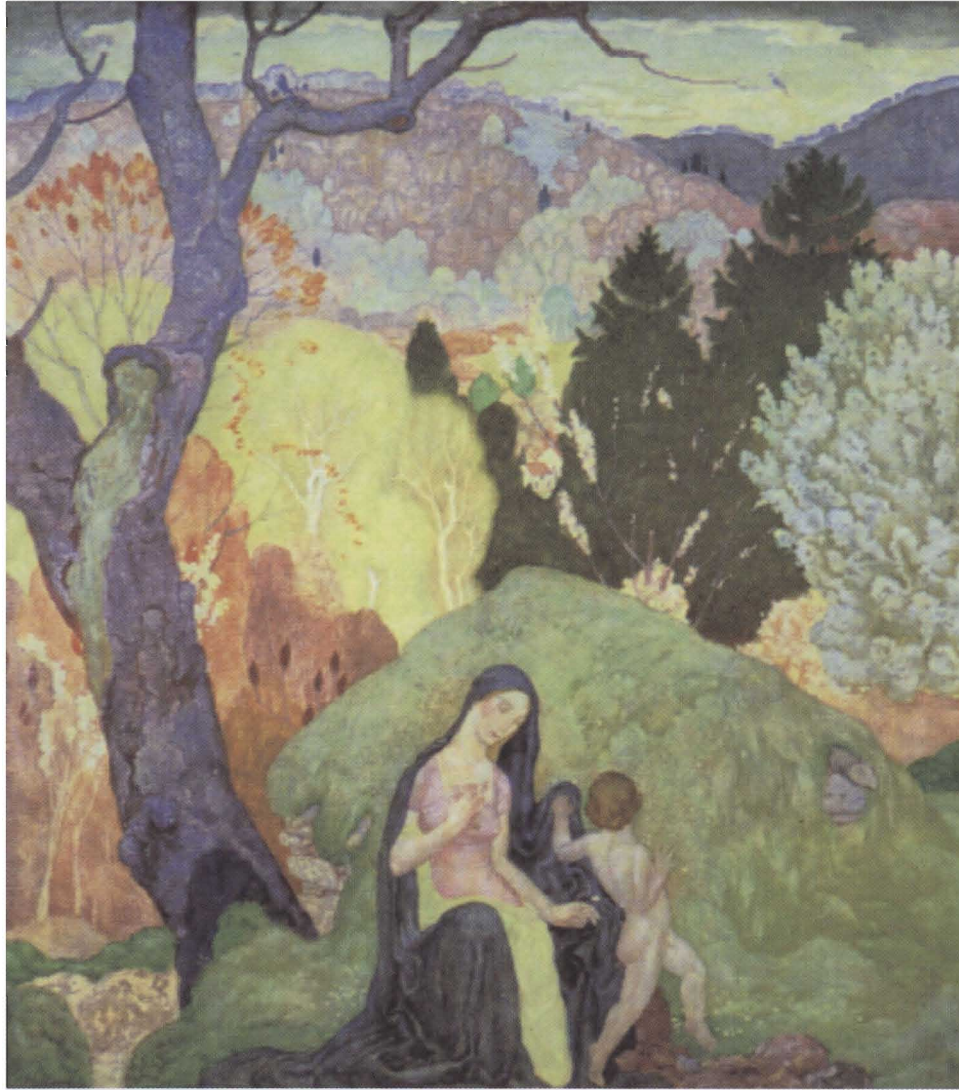
Utilizing a Romantic approach and infusing it with fantasy, artist Charles Rain felt depicting landscape was more than merely "interpreting contemporary experience." His aim was to record "...the view of one individual - what I see and what I imagine...to suggest reality to the observer and to invite him to construct his own interpretation of the scene at hand."^[2]

Rain felt the landscape held mystery and fantasy. In *Country Cemetery*, he chose a morose subject and turned it into an idyllic place by utilizing hues of bright yellow-green and a brilliant white for the tombstones and church. Gregory Gillespie, likewise, alters reality in *Landscape with Horse*. His work is convincing in its precision but upon closer look, the objects are



Theodoros Stamos, *A Walk in the Poppies*, 1952, oil on canvas, 55" x 40", University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F.M. Hall Collection.

fanciful creations that exist only in the artist's imagination. Rejecting the title of realist, Gillespie found his work most interesting when it began to become distorted. Like the Flemish master Hieronymus Bosch, Gillespie's use of rich tones and precisionist technique combined with hallucinatory subjects result in works of psychological incon-



ABOVE Eugene Savage, *Almighty Spring*, n.d., oil on canvas mounted on panel, 32 1/2" x 36 1/2", University of Nebraska–Lincoln, F.M. Hall Collection.

COVER Raymond Knaub, *March Fields*, 1996, oil on linen, 30 1/4" x 32 1/8", University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition Trust.

gruity.

The stock market crash in the late 1920s and the devastating effects of the dust bowl era created a desire in Americans to revert back to a simpler lifestyle and reestablish a oneness with the land. Regionalist artists responded to harsh times by utilizing representational means to produce straightforward compositions of people coping with day-to-day challenges. The message sent was one of hope and optimism for better times. Regionalist artist Dale Nichols often reconstructed in his art the early life experiences of his youth in Nebraska. Of his rural paintings, Nichols stated, "These paintings are not just pictures of farms. All are recreations of farm life. In painting those canvases I felt again the vastness of endless skies, the penetrating cold of Nebraska winters; lived again as farmer's live."^[3] The painting titled *Summer's Bounty* depicts a tidy farm scene glowing with the sun's warm light and bursting with the fruits of human labor.

As a member of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Theodoros Stamos rejected the popular, illustrational styles of his Regionalist counterparts as ineffectual for the many problems facing the modern world. Although Stamos was not a painter of nature, he was deeply affected by landscape, particularly that of his homeland Greece. In a statement he made about the abstract expressionist likeness to primitive art, he said, "we are working with the pure plastic language we call abstract, are infusing it with intellectual and emotive content and who, without any limitation of primitive symbols are creating a living myth for us in our own time."^[4] One can imagine the kind of day Stamos expresses in *A Walk in the Poppies*. His use of bright colors is almost blinding in its brilliancy. The image is further dramatized by the black gestural markings, reflecting an Asian influence that Stamos laid across



Robert Adams, *Pikes Peak*, 1970-74, silver print, 5 11/16" x 6", Nebraska Art Association, Funding provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

the top.

Because the city is the epitome of human development and dominance artists have found it an attractive subject. Deemed the nation's city of culture after the civil war, New York City became a magnet for artists and a focus for study. The strong geometric lines of

the high rises as well as the crosscurrent of culture, politics and changing gender roles were just a few of the many subjects artists could explore. A contemporary of Theodoros Stamos, Romania born Hedda Sterne arrived in New York in 1941 during WWII. Unlike most Abstract Expressionist artists Sterne's interest lies in structure and drawing rather than color. In her belief

that art is the process of gaining knowledge, she used her work to exorcise the speed, noise, lights and vastness of New York. Rather than expressing these characteristics her work circumscribed the place through her imaginative means. Described as possessing "arbitrary light distilled through the most elusive transparencies," Sterne's so-called "roads" may first appear flat, but then open up into a three-dimensional space and perspective.^[5]

While some considered the city's fast growth and masses of people a sign of decline, others regarded the tall structures and large population a symbol of advancement and prosperity. Manfred Keiler in his work titled *Curse of the Century* filled his canvas with high-rise buildings, water towers, wires and poles. Through the clutter of human-made structures, Keiler communicates doom and despair.

Rather than choosing one crowded area to focus on, Dong Kingman approaches the city from the outside. As though on a boat in the harbor, the viewer has an overall glimpse of the city. Like Stuart Davis and George Grosz, Kingman inserted sarcasm and humor in his works. In *New York After the Storm*, the words



Dong Kingman, *New York After the Storm*, 1942, watercolor on paper, 20 3/4" x 31 1/4", University of Nebraska-Lincoln, F.M. Hall Collection.



Dale Nichols, *Summer's Bounty (As Ye Sow)*, 1941, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Miller and Paine.

"War Bond" cannot be missed even from the distance of the harbor. By utilizing watercolor as a medium, Kingman was able to create convincing textural qualities such as age, smoke, steam and rust. These he combined with creative figures and elements never seen in the city. Where Keiler and Kingman's New York scenes possess human-made structures, Samuel Halpert's work, *Late Afternoon, Central Park*, attempts to strike a balance between concrete and nature through its focus on the lush, green square of Central Park. A student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and a participant in art exhibitions at the Salon, Halpert brought back to the states a French post-impressionist aesthetic that was found widely appealing.

Isabel Bishop belonged to a group of artists who called themselves the Fourteenth Street School, made up of heirs to the Ashcan artists. Rather than architecture and urban design these artists were interested in social trends of the city such as immigration, mass communication and high society living. Along with the glimmer and glitz of the city, they represented the grime and poverty. Bishop was particularly interested in the "universal humanness" that she observed from her studio at Union Square in New York.^[6] For fifty-eight years she studied the people gathered around the fountain for lunch breaks. New York represents the mass-

es of people in the city and exemplifies Bishop's interest in the movement generated in a crowd of people.

Contemporary artists continue to search for their place in our changing environment. David Anderson captures New York City through the lens of his camera. Working as an architectural photographer, Anderson is able to view buildings from rare vantage points. Through cropping techniques and a focus on light and unique angles, Anderson's images give viewers a sharp, tension-filled perspective of the city.

Artists Keith Jacobshagen and Ray Knaub prefer the big skies in the Midwest and are particularly interested in light and atmospheric conditions. Born in the North Platte River Valley, Knaub focuses on light, the mood it produces and the way it involves the forms of the land. Jacobshagen, a native of Kansas but a long-time resident of Nebraska, invents paintings from numerous studies he makes of the land. His wide-horizon scenes of familiar Nebraska places reflect the perspective he developed as a child while flying in an airplane with his father.

Artist Larry Schwarm's objective is to generate a personal visual order from what he sees. Living on the edge of the Kansas Flint Hills, Schwarm witnesses the annual burning of the prairie. His fascination with fire, minimalist space and the intensity of color

are reflected in his photographs. The dichotomy that results from fire in its destructive yet rejuvenating qualities evokes an emotion for the artist that he wishes to pass on to the viewer.

Two artists clearly interested in the dominance of humans over land are photographers Robert Adams and Tod Papageorge. Adams has been photographing the West since the 1960s. In disgust over his observations of nature's destruction, he began photographing the two forces in black and white. Rather than focus on the damaging effects, however, Adams pursues the power of the land's resilience and its ability to recover from human intervention. Adams states, "... the land no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolute persistent beauty."^[7] Papageorge is more forthright in his compositions portraying human intrusion. Nature becomes a small part of the human conglomeration that is central in the photograph.

The relationship between humankind and the land is inseparable. Artists approach nature in unique and varying ways to better understand their place within it. Some artists utilize landscape as a metaphor to express the multiple meanings that nature has for the human experience. While Romanticists seek out the emotive elements, abstract artists strive for a purely spiritual transformation. Some representational artists include the physical presence of humans within their surroundings while others prefer only the elements that suggest human involvement. More recently, concerns over environmental loss have motivated artists to respond utilizing their art as a tool to raise consciousness. Landscape art is as ever changing as the land. The result is a more keen awareness of the fragility of our daily existence.

Sharon L. Gustafson
Statewide Exhibition Coordinator

[1] William Vaughn, *Romanticism and Art* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.), 1994, p. 132.

[2] Sheldon Art Gallery Archives.

[3] Artist biography submitted to The Chicago Art Institute.

[4] *Theodore Stamos: History and Recent Paintings* (Sam Hunter) *Arts Magazine*, volume 62, no. 10, p. 56.

[5] *Hedda Sterne New Paintings*, exhibition brochure (Dore Ashton) CDS Gallery, 1987.

[6] *Walking Pictures*, exhibition brochure (John Whitney Payson) Midtown Payson Galleries, 1992.

[7] Robert Adams, *The New West* (Boulder: The Colorado Associated University Press), 1974.

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Program Schedule

- NORTH PLATTE** **October 10 – November 8, 2002, Pawnee Hotel-Crystal Ballroom**
Local Sponsors: Nebraskaland National Bank, United Nebraska Bank, Wells Fargo Bank, Ross Perry Motors, First National Bank, Adams Bank and Trust, North Platte Telegraph, Al's Lock and Safe
- HOLDREGE** **November 15 – December 16, 2002, Holdrege Public Library**
Local Sponsors: Dr. and Mrs. Stuart Embury; Dr. and Mrs. Wayne Quincy; Dr. and Mrs. Doak Doolittle; First National Bank of Holdrege; Holdrege School Foundation; National Art Honor Society, Holdrege Chapter
- McCOOK** **January 7 – February 2, 2003, Museum of the High Plains**
Local Sponsor: McCook Arts Council
- AURORA** **February 6 – March 4, 2003, Edgerton Explorit Center**
Local Sponsor: Hamilton County Foundation, Inc.
- BEATRICE** **March 6 – April 3, 2003, Gage County Museum**
- COLUMBUS** **April 7 – May 4, 2003, Columbus Art Gallery**
Local Sponsors: Robert C. and Linda Labenz, Columbus Bank and Trust Company
- GRAND ISLAND** **May 6 – June 5, 2003, Edith Abbott Memorial Library**
Local Sponsors: Home Federal Bank, Grand Island Public Schools
- HASTINGS** **June 7 – July 6, 2003, The Hastings Museum**
Local Sponsor: The Hastings Museum of Natural and Cultural History

All dates and locations are subject to change.



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