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Plate 1

George Bellows, *Hill and Valley (Monhegan)*, 1913. Oil on panel, 15 x 19 1/2 inches. Colby College Museum of Art. Museum purchase.

Thoughts on Landscape

By MICHAEL MARLAIS

LANDSCAPE PAINTING is only rarely an exercise in making a beautiful picture. The very best artists can get away with doing so and the worst try to without success. Great landscape painters, and there have not been all that many of them, can make of the landscape itself a transcendent thing. In their work, beauty becomes truth and the materials of art—paint, color, composition, texture—inspire in the viewer thoughts that are beyond the mere physical appearance of mountains, trees, and water. Such transcendence is personal. Several paintings by Camille Corot come to my mind, so too does George Bellows's *Hill and Valley (Monhegan)* (Plate 1, left) discussed elsewhere in this volume. Self-indulgent painters have spent countless hours in front of the landscape in fruitless attempts to imitate such mastery. In truth, most landscape painting functions on a very different level. Historically, the vast majority of successful landscape painters have been able to infuse views of nature with thoughts that give voice to the spirit of their times, using landscape to communicate the values of the society in which they live. This, not those rare transcendent moments, has been the real business of landscape painting since its invention in Western art during the Renaissance. Artists may think that they are reaching for the sublime, the timeless, but in truth they are most often firmly grounded in the often mundane, sometimes significant, values of their times. And such is not a bad thing. The Colby College Museum has a good sampling of landscape paintings that can be read as signs of the times in which they were created. Some are more easily read than others.

Albert Bierstadt's *View of Chimney Rock* (Plate 2, p. 364), painted around 1860, is relatively straightforward to anyone familiar with the aspirations of Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. It fairly screams "manifest destiny," and that in part is what the painting is about. Chimney Rock, in the western part of present-day Nebraska, was a sign to travelers on the wagon routes that they were leaving the Great Plains and entering the Rocky Mountains. In essence it meant that they were entering the "real" west, both frightening and promising. And the painting certainly gives us both sides of the adventure with the bright almost heavenly light in the background and the gathering dark clouds in the foreground. But those clouds also suggest further nuance in what this painting tells us about nineteenth-century America.

Historians now understand that the concept of manifest destiny was less the spirit of the age than a manufactured concept designed to lure travelers westward, to take possession of the land, and as a consequence, to evict the



Plate 2

Albert Bierstadt, *View of Chimney Rock*, c. 1860. Oil on millboard,
13 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art.
Gift of the Hon. Roderick H. D. Henderson.

peoples that already occupied it. Sensitive Americans were well aware of what was happening in the West and Bierstadt, who traveled many times to the region, was one who lamented the passing of the tribal lifestyle of the peoples of the Western Great Plains. It is, after all, the Sioux campsite in the foreground that lies in shadow, eclipsed by the bright promise of westward expansion. Bierstadt's painting, then, records both sides of the migration to the West, positive and negative, and indicates that not all Americans were blind to the loss that was inevitable.

The *View of Marshall's Pillar* (Plate 3, p. 366) in the Colby collection, attributed to Thomas Cole, certainly speaks to values espoused by Cole and others in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Previously most Americans had thought of wild nature as something fearful that needed to be conquered. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College, had apologized for the "wild" state of the Connecticut landscape in the early 1800s, noting that soon the scene would be made more pleasing by agriculture, husbandry, and other signs of civilization. But Cole's generation viewed the primitive side of nature in a more favorable light. They saw wild nature as the awe-inspiring manifestation of the sublime power of the deity. Indeed, while they often noted that the American landscape was devoid of those reminders of ancient antiquity that ennobled the Italian countryside, the United States had raw, primitive, and powerful scenery that was even more inspiring. As many have noted, these concepts were connected to ideas of the sublime as they had developed in the philosophy of Edmund Burke, but Americans put a particularly local spin on the concept.

Thus Colby's *View of Marshall's Pillar* is about sublime nature and the small efforts of pioneers to tame that nature. The scene is in present-day West Virginia, which of course was Virginia at the time. The area is the valley of the New River at Kanawha Falls. The scene was part of the property of Colonel William Tyree, the first sheriff of Fayette County, also a member of the state legislature. In the early nineteenth century two hunters, John McClung and Captain Matthew Arbuckle, discovered the large rock tower to the right in the painting. They called it "Hawk's Nest Cliff," but in 1812 the name was changed to Marshall's Pillar after John Marshall, from Virginia, who was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the time. But Marshall was also head of a commission that in 1812 examined a proposed route for linking the James and Kanawha rivers by a canal along the New River. Apparently Marshall himself measured the sheer drop from the top of the rock to the ground below. From the beginning Virginians recognized the grandeur of the place and Colby's painting does as well. The small farm in the lower left corner, just cleared of the forest that dominates the rest of the painting, seems precarious indeed in conjunction with the rocky landscape around it. Nature dominates here and humans tread with trepidation on the scene.

Today the scene around Marshall's Pillar is quite changed and it has had, interestingly, a checkered history. The area is now part of Hawk's Nest State Park, established in 1935, and the river has been dammed to create a lake. From 1930 to 1935 a tunnel was drilled through the canyon wall by Union Carbide to divert water through Gauley Mountain to a hydroelectric generating station. The tunnel went through concentrated, almost pure, silica and

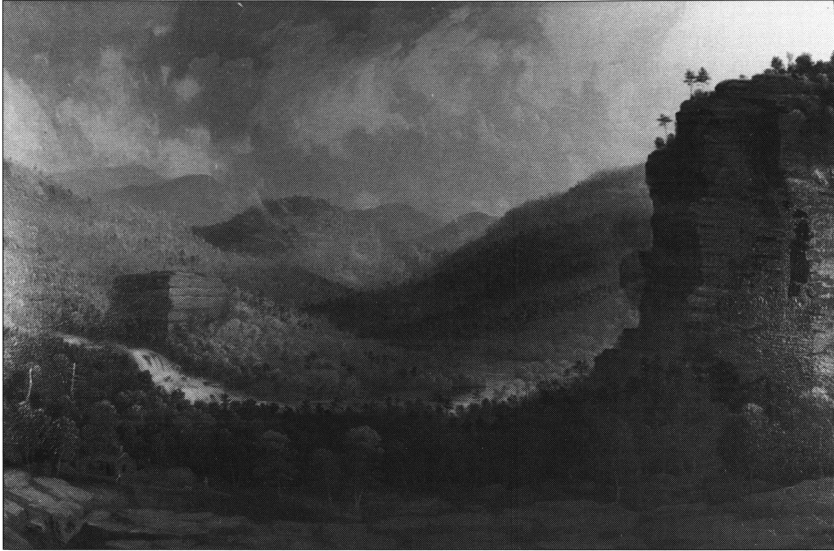


Plate 3

Thomas Cole (?), *View of Marshall's Pillar*. Oil on panel,
17 x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art.
Gift of Mr. Charles D. Childs.

Plate 4

Richard Wilson, *Landscape with River and Temple*, 1773. Oil on canvas,
35 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Colby College Museum of Art.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morrie A. Moss.



although estimates vary, it is clear that well over 500 men lost their lives from the lung-polluting effects of drilling through the material. None of this, of course, was apparent when the Colby painting was completed but it is a history that hangs on the painting now, just as surely as its original dialogue between wild and cultivated nature. The best of nature and the worst of what comes from the unthinking and uncaring tampering with nature and the lives of underpaid miners cloaks the scene with meaning and weights it down.

Richard Wilson's *Landscape with River and Temple* (Plate 4, left), of 1773, certainly appears at first to be simply an attempt at a pretty picture, although it isn't all that pretty. It belongs to a genre of painting that is generally termed "Italianate" and was immensely popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin were the past masters of the genre and legions of eighteenth and nineteenth century artists sought to emulate what was a very saleable manner. But there is a very clear indication in this painting, and all the multitude of other paintings done in the same style, of social and national goals, in particular the desire to lay claim to the heritage of the ancient world of Greece and Rome. One after the other the nations of Europe, and later the United States, sought to stake out a claim for connection to the "values" of the ancients. Never mind that these values were always interpreted in particularly local ways—editing out the pornography that delighted ancient Greeks and Romans was one way, forgetting the garish colors that often adorned ancient statues and architecture was another. Wilson's painting is one more example of, in this case, the British desire to take on the mantle and authority of the past—if you will, one further example of the "barbarians" trying to take over the last vestiges of a civilization they could not quite conquer. Hitler showed how such cultural appropriation might be politically charged, but there were subtler, although no less nationalistic, manifestations in Germany earlier, and in France, England, and The United States. On one level Wilson's painting says the same thing the Jefferson Memorial in Washington says.

No school of painting was more prone to attempting to paint purely beautiful pictures than were the impressionists—although their concept of beauty was revolutionary. Volumes of art history have been written about the valiant attempts of the French painters to strip every anecdote, every idea, every social message, from their paintings. This was all read as the foundation of modern art, the beginnings of the twentieth century notion that art is self-sufficient, that the subject of art is art itself. The impressionists were understood as having made paintings that were virtually subjectless, excuses for their triumphant aesthetic exercises, nature viewed through an artistic temperament. Such readings of impressionism have given way in recent years to Marxist interpretations of the movement that stress the bourgeois character of the style, the market strategies of the artists, the lack of interest in the lower classes. The world the impressionists painted was the world of the new bourgeois class they all hoped to court as patrons, and impressionist paintings are now viewed as artifacts of a particular social climate bound to a particular social class.

William Merritt Chase's *Tompkins Park, Brooklyn* (Plate 5, p. 368), the finest impressionist styled work in the Colby collection, is a clear social marker indicative of the artist's ambitions and the ambitions of a rising bourgeois



Plate 5

William Merrit Chase, *Tompkins Park, Brooklyn*, c. 1887. Oil on canvas,
17 ³/₈ x 22 ³/₈ inches. Colby College Museum of Art.
Gift of Adeline F. and Caroline R. Wing.

class in New York City. Chase was not, of course, a member of the impressionist group but rather an American drawn to the movement more than a decade after its heyday. In 1887, when this painting was completed, impressionism was ending as a movement, the final exhibition of the group having occurred the previous year. Famous for remarking that he would rather go to Europe than to heaven, Chase here brings all of his remarkable powers to bear on the task of turning New York City into Paris. Excited by the bright colors and visible brushstroke of the “new” Parisian style of painting, he creates a version of the style that would not have been out of place in the galleries of Paul Durand-Ruel, the dealer who sold the work of the impressionists in Paris and New York. More than mere homage to Parisian art this painting is a statement of a social and, indeed, political position. With not so much as a glance at the poverty of the lower classes in New York, Chase paints a pretend world of orderly upper-class life, a world of francophile sophistication in a society that was still colloquial and in many quarters unconcerned with things European. He counters the homespun American emphasis of a Winslow Homer with what many would have viewed as a dandified preoccupation with a foreign culture. His paintings were a badge of sophistication not only for himself but also for the patrons that purchased them.

There is more to say about what impressionism did for—and to—the concept of landscape painting. In its day the most radical thing about impressionism was its dual concentration on nature, on the one hand, and on brushstroke on the other. Nature, without anecdote, without moral, without history, without any story at all, was the subject of impressionist painting. This was radical at a time when audiences expected stories with their paintings. Even more radical was the idea that brushstroke itself, the artist’s own signature working of paint on the surface of the canvas, could be interesting and important. This last concept has, of course, been the very mantra of modernist art, and many see impressionism as beginning the “inevitable” surge of the avant-garde in the twentieth century. Whether this is true or not there can be no doubt that impressionism was all about forming an avant-garde movement and an audience who wanted to purchase some part of that avant-garde cachet. It’s really less about the brushstroke itself than about the agreement between artists, dedicated to the brushstroke, and patrons willing to pay money to own the brushstroke. The creation of an audience of connoisseurs of the brushstroke was essential to the success of impressionism. The Marxist view of the situation would speak to the creation of a demand for an essentially unimportant product by offering potential buyers the chance to be “in the know,” to be smart enough, sensitive enough, avant-garde enough to buy those paintings. Whether one takes the cynical view or not there is no doubt that much of the twentieth century in art has been about an agreement between artists and their audience about what may be accepted as being art. In the Renaissance one knew that the Sistine ceiling was art, one knew in the Middle Ages that Chartres Cathedral was art. In the twentieth century one had to learn, then agree, that a wall with paint splashes on it was art. The audience for art, not surprisingly, has gotten quite a bit smaller.

John Marin's *From Seeing Cape Split* (Plate 6, right), of 1935, is the kind of modernist landscape painting that can make nonbelievers angry. The rough application of paint and the apparent disregard for the rules of perspective make paintings like this unpalatable to the uninitiated. Those knowledgeable about the development of modern art would see here Marin's homage to one of the great progenitors of modernism, Paul Cézanne. Marin manages to make Cape Split, Maine—where the artist lived—look like the Gulf of Marseilles as seen in one of Cézanne's best-known paintings, in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The flattened perspective especially draws on the work of Cézanne and serves to focus attention on the two-dimensional reality of the canvas surface itself, one of the singular preoccupations of modernist art.

So too, an audience receptive to modernist art theory would see the rough handling of paint here as further emphasis on the very means of painting itself, precisely at the expense of visual reality. It is an assertion of the importance of art over nature—or, better yet, an indication of art as parallel to nature, again a reference to the art theories of Paul Cézanne. Finally the simple color harmonies of the painting—it is basically a study in tones of brown, blue, and white—is one more recognition of the important role that the work of Paul Cézanne played in the spread of modernism and in the work of John Marin. Although Marin himself might well disagree, it seems to me that *From Seeing Cape Split* is very much an insider's painting, a work of art that asks of its viewer to know something about the history of modern art and to appreciate the subtleties of modernist art theory. To be sure, the painting is also a rough homage to a rough place, the coast of Maine that Marin so dearly loved. But it's an homage that might well be lost on many of the people who live on the coast of Maine. And it is a painting that is simply not like a painting such as Bierstadt's *Chimney Rock* in the way it speaks to its audience.

Richard Diebenkorn's *Blue* (Plate 7, p. 372), a woodcut from 1984, is even more circumspect in relating to its audience than Marin's painting. That I would include it in a discussion of landscape indicates the complexity of the relationship. Few viewers would see a landscape here, yet landscape is the very essence of all of the work Diebenkorn created after moving to the Ocean Park area of Santa Monica in 1966. From that point until his death in 1993 all of Diebenkorn's work took on the abstract qualities seen in *Blue*. Large areas of roughly brushed in color are opposed to linear accents throughout the Ocean Park series. Gone are the figures in landscape setting that were the signature of Diebenkorn's work in San Francisco. Yet the Ocean Park paintings were anything but abstract. Just as they are infused with color they are infused with the colors of the ocean views Diebenkorn loved. The blue of sky and ocean is played off against the yellow of the sand or the rose tones of a sunset. The lines on the surface suggest perspective views into depth, hinting at a vast landscape. *Blue*, in particular, may be read as a cool interior space with a view to a landscape through a window in the upper right corner. Or it may simply be read as a virtuoso play on the colors and effects of an ocean view at sunset. None of this is obvious, nor is it necessary to know to simply



Plate 6

John Marin, *From Seeing Cape Split*, 1935. Oil on canvas,
23 x 29 1/2 inches. Colby College Museum of Art.

The John Marin Collection.

Gift of John Marin, Jr. and Norma B. Marin.

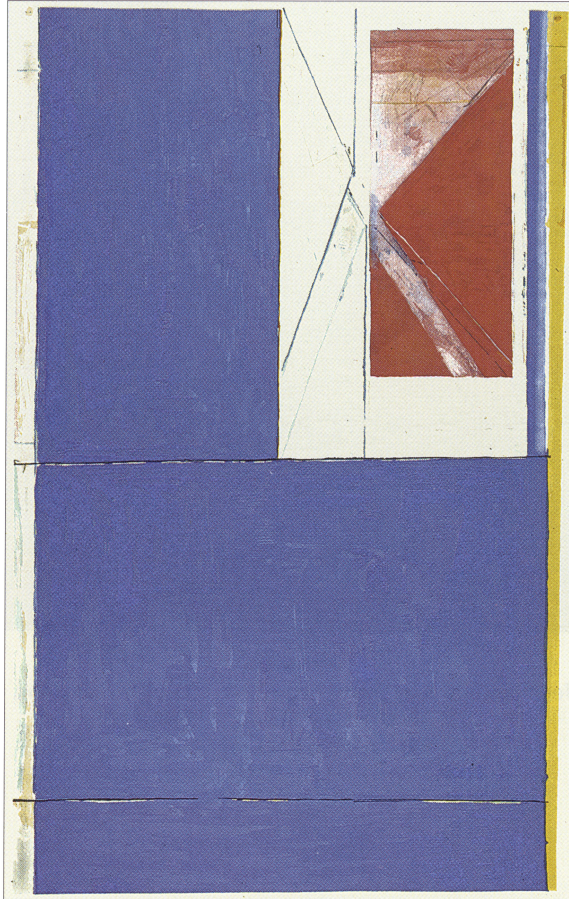


Plate 7

Richard Diebenkorn, *Blue*, 1984. Woodcut printed in colors, 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 25 inches. Colby College Museum of Art. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund.

enjoy the abstract qualities of the image. But *Blue* is not fully understandable without knowing its relationship to Diebenkorn's environment. Nor is it understandable without reference to art history.

Blue is very much about Diebenkorn's continuing response to the work of the early twentieth-century French modernist Henri Matisse. The composition, that suggestion of a room with a view to the outside, is a direct homage to Matisse. So too is the brilliant pure color of the painting, and the sense of geometric elements juxtaposed to pure color. Diebenkorn positions himself here, and throughout the Ocean Park series, as both humble student of Matisse, and torchbearer of the legacy of Matisse, in which art is meant to be a feast for the eyes, pure joy to observe.

Finally of course *Blue* is all about being reductive, perhaps the prime motivating factor of much of the art of the twentieth century. Color is reduced to the three primary hues: red, yellow, and blue, the colors from which all other color is made. Shapes are reduced to simple angles, lines reduced to a few suggestions of direction. And landscape is reduced now to a mere suggestion of nature—unreadable, perhaps, to some, but nonetheless powerful in what it offers to those willing to accept it. *Blue*, like all of Diebenkorn's art, requires work on the part of the viewer. It is neither immediately available as landscape nor, for that matter, as art. Unlike the paintings discussed earlier in this essay it requires explanation, rather than simply being enhanced by one. This is neither good nor bad, just a fact that applies to virtually all recent art.