

RESEARCH PAPER

LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND THE SUBLIME

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A unique relationship exists between the notions of "sublimity" and landscape painting. This paper will focus specifically on the sublime as it relates to 18th and early 19th century landscape painting. The goal of this paper is to briefly chart sublimity from the early Greeks to its usage in 18th century England and show the concept of sublimity in relation to landscape painting. This relationship, while abstract in definition, moves from one of nature as it truly exists to a generalized interpretation of nature incorporating the artist's feelings and emotions. This paper is not an attempt to condense the meaning or beginnings of sublimity. For the interested reader, there are two important books that deal extensively with the origin and the meaning of the word sublime: Longinus On the Sublime, by James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett and The Sublime by Samuel H. Monk. For purposes of this paper, it may be of benefit to define the word sublime as it exists today before looking at its beginning roots and history.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, defines the word sublime, when used as an adjective to be:

- a) Lofty, grand or exalted in thought, expression or manner;
- (b) of outstanding

spiritual intellectual or moral worth; (c) tending to inspire awe, usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility or grandeur).¹

The idea of the sublime existed in Greek and Roman literature and is most often attributed to a Greek philosopher and critic named Longinus. This paper will begin with a short synopsis of Longinus' treatise "On the Sublime", followed by an examination of how sublimity became related to landscape painting.

Longinus' aesthetic judgment was based on a high sense of man's dignity. He looked at how man reacted to natural phenomena such as volcanoes and oceans in relationship to their artistic responses. His paper, "On The Sublime" is a rebuttal against a reading written by Caecilius of Calacte, who was a rhetorical theorist. Longinus felt that Caecilius' work was full of flaws because it did not mention important points on sublimity, nor did it mention how the concept of sublime was to be attained. Longinus felt sublimity had a practical use and wanted to be able to show its use through his treatise. The following passage from that paper illustrates this:

"...2. You see, by true sublimity our soul somehow is both lifted up and - filled with delight and

great glory, as if our soul itself had created what it just heard. 3. Whenever a man of sense, experienced in speeches and writing, hears something very often but does not have his soul uplifted and whenever what he hears does not leave deep in his mind more to theorize on than what was actually said, if you look well into it you will see that it falls into a state of withering underdevelopment inasmuch as it held in the mind only while it is heard. You see, what is really great has much about which to theorize and is difficult, or rather beyond our capacity to withstand, and the memory of it is strong and hard to let go of. 4. On the whole, consider it a rule that these sublimities are fine and true to nature which are satisfying throughout all time and to all men. You see, whenever men of different behaviors, lives, emulations, ages, and speeches and writings, all have one and the same opinion about something, then the agreed upon opinion arising out of a discordant group, takes on for the object a wonder, an assuring strength which does not lend itself to debate"²

Longinus' passage from "On the Sublime" tells us that whatever is truly sublime in a great work cannot imitate nature because nature is not great everywhere. This passage is also saying

that man in general is capable of learning to appreciate the sublime. Longinus describes five ideas pertaining to the sublime, as outlined in the following passages from this same paper:

"... one may say, five kinds of springs most productive of sublimity of address (although capacity for speaking is a kind of common foundation for these five ideas, without which generally there is nothing) - first and most powerful is a solid thrust of conception..., second is an intense enthusiastic emotion (these first two are for the most part self-bred constituents of sublimity, while those now left come also from technique); third is a sort of molding of figures, both figures of conception and those of style; in addition to these there is a noble phrasing, the parts of which are the selection of words and the trope and "make up" elaboration of style; and the fifth spring responsible for greatness, which includes all before it, is the way things are put together in worth and loftiness "3

From Longinus's time until the 18th century, the basic definition of sublime changed very little. It should be noted that the concept of sublime, until the 18th century, applied to rhetoric, not painting. Sublimity seemed to be most

associated with epics and poetry. The notion of sublimity in landscape painting was first introduced in the late 17th century. Before the early part of that century, the primary goal of landscape painting was to acknowledge a mood and a setting for ideas of "antiquity." Greek and Roman architecture, along with literary subjects dominated landscape compositions in such paintings as Titian's "Bacchanal."

In contrast the artist Amenable Carracci (1560-1609), best known for his ceiling fresco in the gallery of the Farrese Palace, felt that art must return to nature. His painting "Landscape with the Flight into Egypt" shows a vast landscape depicting space with the use of atmospheric perspective and figures transversing the land. However, Carracci's figures do not dominate the composition. The landscape seems to be generalized in that it could be located anywhere other than Egypt. Carracci depicts the landscape as a "civilized" land. A land with cultivated fields, herds of sheep, a ferryman in his boat and roads leading to a castle. "Landscape with the Flight into Egypt" is a pastoral scene, the "ideal landscape" that evokes a vision of Nature that is gentle yet austere, grand but not awesome.⁴ It would be some fifty years before this idea of landscape painting was re-examined and made more concrete and the birth of sublimity in painting was recognized.

Landscape painting, as a "serious" art form, started its upward climb to popularity during the late 17th century with the Dutch masters. (It wasn't, however, until the early 18th century that landscape painting came into its own with such artists as Poussin, Wilson, Gainsborough, Claude, Constable, and Turner. The ideas of sublimity in landscape painting helped elevate its standing as a significant art form).

The question of sublimity in painting was brought about by the debate over whose work, Raphael's or Michelangelo's, was more sublime. According to Roger dePiles, author of Art of Paintings:

"Raphael is superior to Michelangelo and Leonardo and that his genius is sublime."⁵

Raphael's paintings seemed more true to nature than the paintings of Michelangelo or Leonardo. He painted what is more generalized and more familiar to humanity. According to dePiles, Raphael's thoughts were like those of the ancients: simple, sublime and natural.⁶ DePiles directed the painter to form an image of nature:

"Not only as he happens to see her in particular subjects, but as she ought to be in her self, as she would be, were she not hinder'd (sic) by certain accidents."⁷

This idea of nature and how to reproduce it, became the credo for the neo-classical paintings of the late seventeenth

century. DePiles wrote about the "Grand Gusto", demanding that the painter avoid mediocrity, since:

"... in painting, there must be something Great and Extraordinary to surprise, please and instruct which is what we call the Grand Gusto. 'Tis by this that ordinary things are made beautiful, and the beautiful, sublime and wonderful; for in painting, the Grand Gusto is the sublime and the marvelous are one and the same thing."⁸

By the early eighteenth century, however, ideas about painting as well as the sublime began a dramatic shift, away from Raphael and towards the more personal approach of Michelangelo's work. The art of Michelangelo was more violent and more "Grand" and more individualistic than was that of Raphael. The neo-classics preferred the calmness of Raphael's more perfect interpretation of nature and as was represented by the ancients. On the other hand, Michelangelo's "grandness" of style was not to be ignored. His rise in favor over Raphael is indicative of a change of taste.

Jonathon Richardson, author of Two Discourses, wrote on nature,

"which must be raise'd (sic); and improv'd (sic) not only from what is commonly seen, to what is but rarely, but even yet higher, from judicious and

beautiful ideas in the painter's mind, so that grace and greatness may shine throughout..."⁹

Richardson's credo on the function of art was to raise the importance of a work of art over that of the subject. He wrote:

"...the expression of ideal form to such length that it becomes permissible to raise a portrait above the nobility of the subject".¹⁰

Richardson's ideas on the sublime enabled him to arrive at a new definition of sublimity as it applied to painting. He wrote:

"It appears that my notion of the sublime differs from some others; I confide it to a sense, and give it a latitude as to the style. They are for a certain style and allow that a separate sublimity, whatever the thought be."¹¹

Richardson concluded that the sublime is the:

"Greatest and most beautiful ideas, whether corporeal, or not, convey'd (sic) to us the most advantageously."¹²

By 1769, The British Royal Academy was well established with Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 - 1792) as its president. Reynolds

was also a painter, a writer on art, and the central figure of British art community during the second half of the 18th century. Reynolds held that the art of Michelangelo was supreme in the sublime. Michelangelo's art was individualistic, concrete, rather than generalized. His work showed strong emotion and stood for the "Grand Ideal". All of this was contrary to Raphael's paintings. Reynolds formulated his ideals on sublime through the grand style of the Dutch and Italians. Through a series of discourses, Reynolds defined his ideas of sublime in painting. He stated that sublimity is:

"an excellency that goes beyond mere nature and presents the ideal perfection toward which nature strives. This ideality rests not upon technique, nor even upon mere eclectism, but upon the grandeur of a painter's ideas, his ability to seize out imagination, his intellectual dignity."¹² According to Monk, Reynolds' theories on the sublime are from the influences of Longinus. Longinus understood the importance of technique but also knew that the genius of an orator was his mind. Reynolds also believed that the artist's imagination is much more important than the rules of technique and imitation.

The controversy over the most sublime painter, Raphael or Michelangelo was kept alive through Reynolds. His preference was with Michelangelo as was the preference of 18th century society. He felt Michelangelo's painting had energy and imagination that Raphael's paintings lacked. Reynolds recognized that Raphael's paintings were exquisitely painted renditions of life as it existed around the artist, however deficient in inspiration and poetic romance. Another way of stating the difference between the two artists is that Raphael chose to represent nature as it existed while Michelangelo chose to interpret nature through his own emotions and ideas. The switch of allegiance from Raphael to Michelangelo is more a switch in taste and a re-examination of the definition of sublimity.

John Henry Fuseli (1741 - 1825), a painter and a professor of painting at the Royal Academy during Reynolds tenure as president, also took Michelangelo as the supreme example of sublimity. Fuseli distinguishes three genres of painting with sublimity at the top of his list:

"...the epic or sublime, the dramatic or impassioned, and the historic or circumscribed by truth. The first astonishes, the second moves, and the third informs."¹⁴ Martin Shee an aesthetician and writer on art, explained Fuseli's three genres as:

"The aim of the epic painter is to impress one general idea, one great quality of nature or mode of society, some great maxim, without descending to those subdivisions which the detail of character prescribes: he paints the elements with their own simplicity, height, depth, the vast, the grand, darkness, light; life, death; the past, the future; man, pity, love, joy, fear, terror, peace, war, religion, government; and the visible agents are only engines to form one irresistible idea upon the mind and fancy..."¹⁵

Thomas Gainsborough (1727 - 88), artist and rival of Reynolds in "face painting", would have liked nothing better than to paint only landscapes. However, portraiture commanded much more money than did the painting of landscape. Unlike Reynolds, Gainsborough's painting of portraiture were not fashioned after any literary figure and did not have any moral implications. His paintings were generated from his feelings, his love of music and rhythm, of color and texture, and his ability to evoke a mood. Gainsborough wrote of his paintings:

"One part of a picture ought to be like the first part of a tune... you can guess what follows, and that makes the second part of the tune."¹⁶

After Gainsborough's death, Reynolds wrote this tribute,
"...his manner of forming all the parts of his
picture together; the whole thing going on at the
same time, in the same manner as Nature creates her
works."¹⁷

Gainsborough was able to do what Reynolds and no one before him could do in bringing together the literal and nonliteral in portraiture. The painting "Mary, Countess Howe" depicts the Lady Howe standing, dressed in a long pink gown wearing a straw hat. The detail in her portrait and dress is in total contrast to the almost imaginary landscape of the background. The landscape is dark grays and blues, very stormy clouds, and is nondescript. Gainsborough's most famous portrait, "The Blue Boy", is another standing figure. Again the detail in the figure is expertly painted with the background landscape more or less nondescript. However, "The Blue Boy" is Gainsborough at his best in that the landscape and the figure echo each other in rhythm and each are totally integrated.

Reynolds' influence on landscape painting, declaring it secondary to epic or history painting, did not last long after his death in 1792. Some 20 years later landscape painting was to become one of England's most celebrated achievements in art. Reynolds and the "sublime" gave English aestheticians a starting point with which to talk about the changes that

occurred in English art. By the late 18th century and early 19th century, sublimity and talk of the sublime had given way to the "Picturesque" and Romanticism. Sublimity could exist within the Picturesque but the major concerns about landscape painting was not so much about the "other worldly" as it was about those characteristics that existed on earth that gave the impression of another world. Jagged rocks, raging rivers or spectacular waterfalls, deep canyons and rugged mountains could all be terrifying and yet picturesque at the same time. The change was brought about by a more "back-to-nature" attitude of English society spurred on by such poets as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other English Lake Poets. Nature and the faithful observation of all her moods was to become the basis by which to achieve the ideals of sublimity.

Two of Englands greatest masters of landscape painting were born one year apart, both were faithful observers of nature, both profited from painting landscape, but both were very different in how each chose to depict nature.

John Constable (1776 - 1837) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775 - 1851), both possessed an inner vision of the sublime in landscape very different from each other. Constable was familiar with the poetic works of William Wordsworth and shared the same sympathies of the sublime in nature. Constable's love of nature was so faithful that he wrote:

"Painting is a science and should be pursued as an enquiry into the law of Nature."¹⁸

The laws of nature that Constable spent most of his time studying, were the clouds, and, in his clouds is the sublimity of his paintings. Constable, writing about his skies:

...It will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the keynote, the standard of scale and the chief organ of sentiment...The sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything; even our common observations of the weather of everyday are altogether suggested by it. The difficulty of skies in painting is very great, both as to composition and execution, because with all their brilliancy they ought not to come forward, or, indeed, to be thought of any more than extreme distances are; but this does not apply to phenomena or accidental effects of the sky because they always particularly attract. I know very well what I am about, and that my skies have not been neglected, though they have often failed in execution, no doubt from an over-anxiety about them, which will alone destroy that easy appearance which nature always has in all her movements. ¹⁹

Constable's skies set the mood for what was to be painted below, on the ground.

Similarly, Turner's painting of the sublime was in his highly personalized vision of the sea and the sky. These two subjects alone are ready made explorations into the sublime, the horizon line being the point of sublimity where the earthly and notions of other worldly become one.

Another aspect of Turner's sublimity was his technique and color. David Piper writes:

...It was part of Turner's achievement successfully to transpose into oils the technique of watercolour, with all its lightness and fluency, and ability to capture the most fleeting, evanescent atmospheric effects... The subject is dissolved into insubstantial mists of glowing, shimmering colour, in which castle or cattle are mere accents subsumed into emanations of light.²⁰

Through the personal vision of Constable, Turner and other Romantic painters and poets, we have learned to "feel" with our eyes. The sublime experience becomes a way to reconcile ourselves with nature by attempting to explain our existence through both the inner mind and our environment. The idea of inspiring awe through beauty, grandeur, and terror at the same time to define sublimity in the modern world as one artistic expression such as painting was achieved by many artists of

the late 1800's and early 1900's. Not only in England but in America where there was a whole new world to be explored and experienced, the American West. Such artists as Asher B. Durand (1796 - 1886), Albert Bierstadt (1830 - 1902), George Inness (18525 - 1894), and Thomas Moran (1837 - 1926) kept the English definition of sublime alive through their paintings and the representation of the American West. To this day the notions of sublime have not changed. Many artists working with landscape as subject matter continue to strive for the beauty, the grandeur, the awe inspired that elevates the landscape to a higher spiritual recognition through the world around them.

ENDNOTES

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6. Monk, p.
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8. Monk, p. 171
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17. Piper, p. 460
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