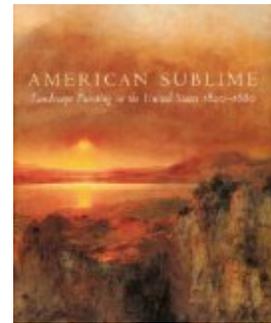


Andrew Wilton, Tim Barringer. *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 256 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-11556-6.

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## Transatlantic Perspectives on American Landscape Painting

In the spring of 1980, Andrew Wilton witnessed an exhibition and catalog that resonated with a project he had authored for museum and publication release by the Yale Center for British Art later in the same year. Wilton's project, *Turner and the Sublime*, explored evocations of the sublime in the drawings, watercolors, and prints of nineteenth-century British painter J. M. W. Turner. The corresponding appearance of *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875* at the National Gallery "spurred" Wilton to consider its "spectacular and provocative" assembly of nineteenth-century American landscapes in the context of his own recent work (p. 9). Twenty-two years later, the Tate Britain produced Wilton's long-meditated response: a major exhibition and catalog publication, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*, co-curated and co-authored by Wilton, (since retired) Keeper and Senior Research Fellow at the Tate Britain, and Tim Barringer, Associate Professor of Art History at Yale University.

The *American Sublime* catalog, which is the focus of this review, is appropriately lavish, including two interpretive essays, catalog entries and color reproductions for each of the ninety-nine paintings, and biographies of the ten featured artists: Asher Brown Durand, Thomas Cole, Fitz Hugh Lane, John Frederick Kensett, Martin Johnson Heade, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. The catalog entries will be helpful to many readers, for the authors combine the social

history of when and where each image was produced and its history of exhibition and ownership with formal and symbolic readings that refer to artistic precedents and culturally specific meanings. Including many of the masterpieces previously featured in *American Light*, as well as other well-known paintings, drawings, and prints from private and public collections, *American Sublime* presents American nineteenth-century landscape painting in the comparative contexts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art, aesthetic theory, and national identity. While acknowledging U.S. innovations in subject matter and formal composition, the key contribution of the *American Sublime* publication is to integrate this nationalistic imagery into transatlantic art and cultural history.

Wilton's opening essay establishes the terms of debate in defining the sublime and the architecture of his application of the sublime to American landscape painting. Sketching in a history of the theory and application of "The Sublime in the Old World and the New," Wilton moves between visual conventions of sublime landscape aesthetics and philosophic definitions of sublime experience. In the poetry of James Thomson, the writings of landscape theorist William Gilpin, and the paintings of Salvator Rosa, John Martin, and J. M. W. Turner, the sublime landscape was rough, rugged, marked by associations with danger, former greatness, and decay; sublime artistic visual conventions included large scale, dramatic lighting, deep space, and a precariously elevated

or oblique perspective. For others, namely Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and John Ruskin, the sublime was a mental, emotional, and spiritual experience that could be assisted but not determined by the precipitating stimulus. It was the contemplation of the divine, the incomparable, and the absolute.

Applying these European formal and philosophical precedents to American landscape painting, Wilton argues that American painters were influenced by European visual conventions of the sublime in scale, subject matter, composition, handling, and allusion, but were unmanned by the lack of historic associations in the American landscape, and overwhelmed by the power, grandeur, and unfamiliarity of the North American landscape, which in turn imbued American landscape painting with the painter's experience of sublime perception. Wilton divides American landscape painters working between 1820 and 1880 into three modes: naive topographical nature worship, grandiose commercial showmanship, and transcendental awe. Before this period, Wilton asserts, there was little taste for landscape in America, and after 1880 British influence waned as American painters turned to French modes of landscape depiction. When European tradition left American painters Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, and Jasper Francis Cropsey bewildered at how to depict the great American wilderness, they demonstrated a "naive willingness to be guided by topography" (p. 20), which Wilton describes as "manifestly functional" (p. 18) and "pragmatic" (p. 19) in comparison to the English painters Constable and Turner, who, Wilton intimates, had less of a challenge in fitting their subject matter to visual conventions, and thus had more time to play with their brushwork. Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran took on the big sights on enormous canvases, creating grand spectacles of Niagara Falls, Yosemite Valley, and the Grand Canyon. While Church and Moran were both influenced by Turner's treatment of light and color, and Ruskin's philosophy of ideal landscapes assembled from real elements, Bierstadt's corny theatricality and wholesale inventions (an old favorite being the appearance of the Alps in the Colorado Rockies) are nevertheless included here as evocations of the grandeur of the sublime. While some might chaff at these Anglocentric characterizations, there is much to appreciate here. In the interpretive essays and catalog entries, most of the attributions of artistic and philosophical influence are both solidly familiar and enhanced by new details that the authors provide.

It is Barringer's contribution, especially in his essay "The Course of Empires: Landscape and Identity in

America and Britain, 1820-1880," that may prove most intriguing to readers of this list. Barringer asserts several similarities in the visual forms and cultural functions of landscape painting in Britain and the United States. Both "enshrine" national myths, both show the collision of nature and culture during urban and industrial development, both were connected to landscape tourism, both rely on the emergence of London and New York as national centers of art production and exchange, and both comment on expansion, exploration, and empire (p. 39). Borrowing his title from the five-part series created by Thomas Cole in 1834-36, Barringer traces many visual elements borrowed from European sources, but more significantly and provocatively, argues that *The Course of Empire* may be seen as a criticism of British industrial development in comparison to the New Eden of America. Whether Cole, who painted this series for the American mercantile class, intended this transatlantic critique, may spur disagreement. As part of the larger argument of Barringer's essay and the overall collaborative project with Wilton, it is certainly worthwhile to reconsider American landscape painting in transatlantic context.

The work of tying each painting to the overall theme of sublimity, or to the eight sub-categories into which the paintings are grouped, is less effectively accomplished, for reasons which return us to this publication's origin in Wilton's 1980 viewing of *American Light*. In 1954 John I. H. Baur termed "luminism" the culmination of eastern U.S. landscape painting, dividing the century into "romantic realists" of the Hudson River School and "pantheistic realist" luminists; *American Light* focused on the latter.[1] In retrospect, Wilton characterizes *American Light* as overly ambitious, for it "attempted to bring a huge range of disparate works of the period under the 'luminist' umbrella" (p. 263). Seeking to avoid a similar effect, Wilton resists the pre-existing and previously debated categories of Hudson River School and luminism as artificial, limited, and misleading groupings. By substituting the sublime as the defining characteristic of American landscape painting between 1820 and 1880, the effect is, although certainly unintentional, unfortunately similar to Wilton's impression of the *American Light* exhibition.

The sublime is an inherently ambiguous category for, as Wilton recognized in the Ruskin epigraph he chose for *Turner and the Sublime*: "The fact is, that sublimity is not a specific term ... anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind ... it is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings ... and there is perhaps no desirable quality of a

work of art, which, in its perfection, is not, in some way or degree, sublime.”[2] Thus, readers of this catalog may experience the feeling of sublimity without fully grasping its meaning, for we are presented with a vast range of impressive images, wonderful to behold, and yet in combination, somewhat bewildering to synthesize as all evocative of a cohesive *American Sublime*.

#### Notes

[1]. John I. H. Baur’s 1954 introduction of the term luminism and later developments are discussed in John Wilmerding, ed., *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980).

[2]. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (1843), quoted in Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 8.

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