

## The Development of Landscape Painting in the Italian Renaissance

How did the attitude towards depicting landscapes in painting change during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the Italian Renaissance? Throughout this period the depiction of natural settings were always subordinated to the figures who occupied central position in the composition. Nevertheless, it was gradually liberated from its function as a purely symbolic backdrop to actually commenting on the mood of the protagonists. Technical innovations, ideological developments, and the increasing influence of classical poetry contributed to the change. Focusing on Florence and Venice as the two major centers for the development of landscape painting in Italy a distinct move from a stylized to a naturalistic representation can be discerned. Beginning with the invention of linear perspective in Florence, coupled with the changing function of religious art, the landscape reflects the growing interest in realism among artists. Leonardo da Vinci is credited for taking a radical departure from his Florentine contemporaries in relation to the depiction of landscape prior to the high Renaissance. By the 1500's the most significant developments in landscape painting occur in Venice. It is here that the landscape becomes more evocative of a certain mood, influenced by the poetry Vergil, whereby the Venetian sensitivity to light and color take landscape to a more naturalistic conclusion. Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian lead the way towards liberating the landscape from the narrative. And although pure landscape paintings had long since been practiced by the Dutch, it was the vision of the ideal landscape that influence the artists of the next three hundred years, following the form of the pastoral ideal.

"The artistic revolution initiated by Donatello, Masaccio and Brunelleschi" in the early years of the Renaissance instigated a preoccupation with finding solutions to technical problems in art. The driving forces underlying these inquiries were scientific and mathematical resulting in a formula that imposed an artificial order onto the representation of the natural world. Immediately, one senses the incompatibility of imposing order onto the haphazard conditions of the natural environment. For instance, at an early stage of the Renaissance Masaccio uses a landscape background as a setting for the heroic biblical figures in his painting: *The Tribute Money*. His composition is constructed on the principles of linear perspective, leading the eye back into the distance. The landscape itself is simplified and linear, yet it is neither convincing, nor is it evocative in mood.

The trouble with mathematical perspective is that it does not lend itself to the depiction of naturalism in landscape painting. No geometrical formula exists for the artist to render atmospheric conditions. "Overlapping tongues of land, curved guiding lines, colour relationships, aerial perspective and various intensities of light" are better means to achieving a believable

landscape. Yet, the empirical rendering of space that the Dutch followed, could not satisfy the mathematically minded Florentines. Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* reflects attributes characteristic of Florentine landscape. It is a landscape of great breadth and truth, topographical in structure with a sharpness of vision that extends all the way back into the distance. This results in a significant pictorial convention known as the panorama. Its predecessor can be traced to Roman *Odyssey* landscapes, a convention that was lost in the Middle Ages. But by the beginning of the fifteenth century, the panoramic vista fully reemerged, achieving a more extensive view through the use of aerial perspective. We see, for example, in Lorenzetti's painting *The Good Government in the Country*, a cross between a bird's eye view and a topographical rendering of the countryside. Although, idealized and awkward in its application of perspective, the portrayal of an actual place is extraordinary for the time.

With the panorama, however, the problem of uniting the foreground subject with the distant setting soon arose, producing two solutions by 1460. The first was to place the foreground figure on a plateau or elevated terrace that dropped away to the broad landscape below.<sup>6</sup> Pietro Perugino uses this method in *The Vision of Saint Bernard* (c. 1490-94). The second solution simply called for foreground figures to float in space above a landscape panorama, a method particularly suited to illustrate man's control over the environment.<sup>7</sup> The best example of this convention is found in the portraits of *Battista Sforza* (1472) and *Frederigo da Montefeltro* (1472) by Piero della Francesca.

Florentine painters, more or less, did not stray from these conventions throughout the Renaissance, with the exception of the radical and isolated innovations of Leonardo da Vinci. He is reputed as being the first artist to actually study nature and from there developed "the first complete aesthetic theory of landscape painting".<sup>8</sup> Beyond just technical advice, his notes create the foundation on which landscape painting could be pursued as an independent genre worthy of contemplation. A passage from his notes on painting reveals his visionary conviction that landscape has the capacity to be relevant in and of itself, insofar as the painter can envision it. This idea identifies the painter as genius, therefore

*if he [the painter] desires valleys or wishes to discover vast tracks of land from mountain peak and look at the sea on the distant horizon beyond them, it is in his power; and so if he wants to look up to the high mountains from the low valleys or from high mountains towards the deep valleys and coastline. In fact, whatever exists in the universe either potentially or actually or in the imagination, he has it first in his mind and then in his hands, and these [images] are of such excellence, that they present the same proportioned harmony to a single glance as belongs to the things themselves.*<sup>9</sup>

It is particularly in his drawings that Leonardo's acute awareness of nature come through. His *Landscape* drawing of 1473 is remarkable because never before had a landscape been represented on it's own. The composition is divided into three planes. Hills, vegetation and a small church occupy the foreground, followed by a town set within the valley in the middle-ground, enclosed by high mountains and swirling clouds in the background. It gives the viewer the impression of a landscape being viewed from a high vantage point. The topographical rendering of this view has been replaced by cross hatched lines to produce the impression of atmospheric conditions and to impart to the viewer a sense of immediacy. The drawing, however, is not a painting, and Leonardo's landscapes on canvas still remain in the background. Yet, they are informed by his drawn studies, sparked by an interest in the process of erosion relating to water and rock.<sup>10</sup>

Leonardo stands as a transitional painter between the symbolic and naturalistic depiction of landscape. The setting for *The Virgin of The Rocks* is not just a backdrop, nor is it an actual place. The landscape is enigmatic and is perhaps meant as a symbolic extension of the figures represented in the foreground.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the drawing that includes the hills as a way to suggest depth, here it is illustrated by using the concept of "things seen through things". We can see through an opening in the rocky formation behind the Madonna to a landscape beyond, yet it is shrouded in a mist. This illustrates a move from objectivity into a realm of the imagined.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain whether Leonardo's landscapes were the products of an aesthetic response or a scientific investigation of the principles at work behind the natural phenomena he examined. Perhaps, it is a combination of the two that dictates his landscape compositions. Documents prove that Leonardo kept written and drawn records of the facts he observed in nature, but his writings also reveal the fact that he formulated ways in which to depict the illusion of nature in accordance with his demand for beauty.<sup>13</sup> Around the time that the painting was made, Leonardo had explored the Italian slopes of Etna.<sup>14</sup> Upon reading Leonardo's chronicle of his journey, some scholars have made connections between his observations and the painting, particularly in the passages describing both his desire and fear spawned by the thought of entering a cavern. He associated it with being a place whose darkness was threatening, yet is aware of the possibility that it may contain something marvelous.<sup>15</sup> This dialogue between man and nature is well expressed in the cavern behind the Virgin, if indeed it is a cavern, because it is so ambiguous while at the same time, inviting. The light radiating from the opening beckons the viewer to take a closer look. The possibility also exists that his landscapes were fabrications of imagination, based on his own advice that "landscapes might

be conjured up by contemplating stains on the wall".<sup>16</sup> Regardless, of what inspired his landscape, the fact remains that he foresaw the possibility that the natural environment could compliment the figures in the foreground. Leonardo's landscapes, with an emphasis on the poetic, differs radically from the passive landscapes of his Florentine contemporaries, foreshadowing the course Venetian painting was to take at the turn of the century.

The idea that art should appeal to the intellect rather than to the senses was less stringent at the onset of the high Renaissance in Venice. Landscape had its biggest flourishing in this region and it was here, not Antwerp, that the term landscape (*paese*) was first applied to paintings.<sup>17</sup> In 1521 Marc Antonio Michiel used the term landscape in his notes while inventorying the collection of Cardinal Grimani by stating that there were many paintings of the sort.<sup>18</sup> Compared to other art inventories at the time, it is the first to group paintings to be categorized under the aegis of landscape, though they were probably not pure landscapes.

That there was a market for landscape is also crucial to understanding its development. The Italians during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had a fondness for Flemish art, astutely buying tapestries and paintings that depicted the Northern countryside.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, with the adoption of oil painting from the Netherlandish tradition, Venetian painters were able to paint landscapes that were "bathed in a new luminosity, transfiguring material forms of nature, and investing them with a spiritual aura."<sup>20</sup> The writings of the classical poet Virgil, in his famous poem, the *Eclogues*, inspired the resurgence of the pastoral ideal which combined the uncertainties of life with a bucolic setting from which to escape them. Also referred to as the Arcadian landscape, the basic structure of these compositions included dark areas of trees and rocks set to both extremities of the canvas. Often times figures were placed to either side, opening up the center where the sky and distance become the focus. Most of the time, a town was placed in the background and connected to the foreground by a bridge or stream, insinuating that the pastoral setting was a safe haven that one can escape to. The pastoral setting was a place of inaction and considered to be an earthly type of Eden, where an intimate bond existed between humans and nature. Most of these paintings were done on a small scale to emphasize the intimacy of the subject matter, contrasting to the larger panoramic compositions in other parts of Italy.

Three artists are heralded for their unique contributions in the development of the pastoral landscape. The first is Giovanni Bellini (c. 1433-1516) whose pastoral scenes remained religious in tone. Following in his tradition is Bellini's student Giorgione (1477-1510) who secularized the pastoral landscape during his lifetime. Then lastly, and perhaps most importantly for the English landscape painters of the eighteenth century, was Titian (1487/90-

1576) who revolutionized the Italian landscape with his loose brushstrokes, gestural style, and rustic themes.

Bellini's paintings are valued as the first examples of landscapes, moving towards naturalism, and revealed by his overwhelming emotional response to light. Most scholars describe Bellini's depictions of the natural world to be facts transformed by love.<sup>21</sup> He is able to capture moments of heightened emotion through the light of day he chooses to use, thereby intensifying the meaning of his subjects. As Bellini gets older, he becomes more fascinated with depicting the full light of day. *St. Francis in Ecstasy* is perhaps the best example of Bellini's accomplishments. We can see that he pays careful attention in the rendering of details, limiting it to selective isolation. A stone, a blade of grass or a flower is rendered with painstaking precision. It is then set apart in order to limit visual over-stimulation caused by an entire grouping of these natural elements done in extreme detail. Uncluttered, the painting has a contemplative quality where the figure of St. Francis shares a quiet bond with nature, dwarfed by the size of the large rock behind him, which translates into religious silence. Beyond the saint stand neatly manicured rolling hills to suggest the cultivation of the land which has taken place over the centuries. This establishes a stable relationship between man and nature, wherein man is in control of his environment. The space of the picture is built up through a series of overlapping parallel planes, much as the eye perceives it. Linear perspective is secondary.

Contrasting to the religious pastorals preferred by Bellini, Giorgione's secularized version grew out of a response to a new kind of patronage, namely the young, noble and culturally refined generation of the High Renaissance.<sup>22</sup> Like Leonardo, Giorgione introduced "new qualities of softness and relief, enveloping shadow and tonal unity," making his landscapes more mimetic and less stiff than Bellini's.<sup>23</sup> The outlines disappeared in his paintings, infusing nature with a sense of tangibility. Giorgione also contributed to the art of Venetian painting by using new techniques such as painting directly onto woven canvases rather than to the traditionally smoothed gessoed canvases.<sup>24</sup> This allowed him to create more expressive compositions that emphasized texture. It worked well to depict atmospheric conditions, engaging the viewer to bring the forms into focus, a technique later perfected by Titian.

*The Tempest, by Giorgione*, is the quintessential poetic landscape, having all the visual elements of a typical pastoral scene. Giorgione's interpretation of the pastoral setting, however, destroys the idea of the safe haven. No one knows what exactly is being represented, but it is clear that the figures share a bond with their environment. A storm appears to be forming in the background, but the figures seem detached, unaffected by it or by each other. There is an

intensely brooding mood conjured by the darkness, imparting a sense of sorcery, which interestingly enough was not uncommon in Vergil's poetry.<sup>25</sup>

Not as dark, yet equally evocative of a distinct mood, are two of the most celebrated landscapes: *Pastoral Symphony* (c. 1510) and *Landscape with a Milkmaid* (1520-25, pen, brush and ink drawing). The first, whose authorship is uncertain, attributed to either Giorgione or Titian or both. The subject is the visual equivalent of Vergil's *Eclogues*. It represents the excursion taken by highly cultivated young men to the countryside.<sup>26</sup> The artist has succeeded in depicting not a place but a state of mind, superimposing the real world onto the pastoral realm. His manipulation of color with his sensitivity to the light of day casts the scene in a golden envelope of light. Built up by thick layers of paint and the visible strokes of his brush, the landscape is suffused with vitality and force that animates the figures within.

*Landscape with a Milkmaid*, a drawing known to have been done by Titian, offers us yet another type of landscape. It depicts rural life and is modeled after Vergil's *Georgics*, a poem dedicated to agriculture. It is not pastoral because it involves figures at work on the land, the antithesis to the carefree attitude that is a requirement for the poetry of the pastoral.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Titian transposes the pastoral landscape onto a Georgic theme. The figures in the foreground are set against the distant town on the horizon, even though they do not have a chance to enjoy the serenity of nature. Intimate, shady groves, found in pastoral settings, are exchanged in favor of expansive agrarian vistas. Titian still brings the figures and the settings together, but it transcends the quiet, contemplative bond depicted by Bellini and Giorgione.

Having examined the growing attention bestowed upon the subject of landscape, one wonders why it never developed into an independent art form during the Italian Renaissance. Certainly, the artists mentioned possessed the skill to be landscape artists, but there is no reason why the idea should have ever crossed their minds. Landscape was not practiced as an art form, The conventional subjects for painting were Christian themes, portraiture, and mythology. The Italian Renaissance was an age of enlightenment and discovery guided by the idea that man was the measure of all things. Nature posed a threat to the achievements of mankind and had to be tempered. This notion is given visual expression throughout the Renaissance by subordinating the environment to figural representations. The Italians did not attach any significance to the landscape except in its ability to provide a pleasant view. It was regarded as superficial, revered for "the merely sensible allure of colors as opposed to the intellectual appeal of measure".<sup>28</sup> Unlike the Flemish artists who produced art for a market based economy, Italian painters of the Renaissance relied on upper class patrons unwilling to spend large amounts of money on a genre held in such low esteem.

When the artist did turn to pure landscape, it was either in the form of a drawing to be used as a study for a background or in the form of prints. Because the print was intended for larger circulation, it did not generate as much money as an original painting. Prints, therefore, permitted a wider range of subject matter, not serious enough for the painter to pursue. Apart from finding pure landscapes represented in these minor art forms, only a handful of artists in the Renaissance made conscious efforts towards cultivating a sense of mood in nature. Yet, this attitude, dedicated to landscape painting, emerged from the minds of a few independent spirits,<sup>29</sup> and did not become a trend recognizable as a movement among artists of the Renaissance.