

STUDIO



ACADEMY

by *M. Miller*

## Creating Your Own Personal Landscape: A Brief History of Landscape Painting

The early 18th century held idealized notions and values that were outdated and unrealistic, and people were beginning to realize this. The last decade of the 18th century and the first decade of the 19th century saw profound changes to the arts that continued to influence western thought about art to this day.

Landscape painting in western European art has seen many dramatic changes over the last few centuries.

**After the French Revolution (1789-1799) the emphasis in art was on the individual, the uniqueness of ideas and expression, and even on the power of the artist to transcend logical thought. At the same time, changes in philosophical thought started to influence commonly held assumptions. Advances were made in the sciences and what most thought of as mysterious was de-cloaked when scientific facts began to emerge and educate the masses.**

**The belief in a human ‘perfect - ability’, which was an emphasis of the Age of Enlightenment, did not survive. Across Europe, a reassessment of religion took hold, and the assertion that sovereigns were rulers descending from God was challenged. In England, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles Darwin, and in France Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) championed the belief that man was not created in definite form. They speculated that humans were ‘created’ through evolution. In Germany, the innovative philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) asserted (among many other ideas) that the views of individuals create the structure of their own experiences. He also believed that peace was possible through international cooperation and democracy - which was contrary to the opinion of the sovereign rulers who dominated Europe at the time.**

**Prior to the late 1700s, landscapes were not paintings on their own; they were merely a backdrop for portraiture or an ecclesiastical event. The paintings were usually didactic in nature depicting a moral or virtuous image and would utilize idealized images of Greek and Roman architecture in the landscapes rather than merely a pastoral setting.**

**However, in the Netherlands Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (1525/30 - 1569) was one of the pioneers of large landscape oil paintings that depicted the “peasant class” as opposed to religious or ruling figures. He was one of the first artists to explore this genre long before it became fashionable or commonly accepted. I recall the first time I saw Bruegel the Elder’s work while in Brussels (or perhaps it was Vienna - I covered a lot of land that year and saw a LOT of art!) I was quite taken at the honest approach of his work - like a visual recording of the time. Clearly, he was a mere observer in many of his works, taking note of daily life around him. I was struck by the vantage point from which he chose to paint; as though he was high on a hill looking down like a shepherd watching and protecting his flock of sheep.**





**Landscape with Nymph & Satyr  
Dancing- 1641**

Claude Lorrain French 1604 -1682



**Fur Traders Descending the  
Missouri - 1845**

George Caleb Bingham 1811- 1879

The Romantic era (approximately 1800-1850) saw landscape paintings swing to the emotional side. John Constable (1776-1837) and Joseph Turner (1775-1851) were both born in Britain and became important figures in art history.



**Snow Storm: Steam boat off a Harbour's  
Mouth - 1842**

Joseph Turner) 1775 -1851



Although Turner achieved fame and fortune in his life, he came from a meagre background of a modest - low income family. He was an intensely private and eccentric character with few friends. His father was his best friend and studio assistant for almost 30 years. When Turner's father died, the artist became more of a recluse and his own health began to fail. Turner's most famous paintings which have become ubiquitous in prints, were emotionally charged, with sweeping moody brush strokes, and his signature imagery of seascapes with turbulent skies. Turner was championed by the foremost art critic of the time, John Ruskin which ushered in fame and fortune for the artist. In his moving paintings, one is captivated by the energy and power of the imagery and application of the paint. The inner struggle of the artist seems to be bursting in turmoil on the canvas. This personal application of Turner's world influenced the French painter Claude Monet (1840-1926) and the American painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970) as well as the entire Abstract Expressionist movement of the 20th century

While Turner was exploring inner turmoil in his paintings, John Constable was exploring areas of his boyhood home and recreating them in his art. Constable thought he painted best when he knew his subject matter well and in this case, it was his home. Constable was born into a wealthy merchant family in Suffolk, England. Although he worked in his father's business for a brief period of time, he chose to pursue his artistic career. In France the sales of his art and prints were better than in his native England; yet, Constable didn't achieve any significant fame or fortune from his art during his lifetime.



‘Painting is but  
another word for  
feeling’  
– John Constable

**Dedham Lock and Mill -  
Approximatly 1820**

John Constable 1776-1837



Meanwhile, in 1800s America, people were busy toiling with the roughness of the land as they settled in “the new world”. Artists were working in a similar vein, painting what they knew and saw, recording life as it was being lived around them. George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879) was a self taught artist whose art faded into obscurity until it was rediscovered in the 1930’s, and now Bingham is considered one of the great 19th Century American painters. His paintings echo Mark Twain’s escapades on the river as a child and are marked with the romantic adventures of typical life in the untamed country.

With Turner painting his tumultuous seas and skies, and Constable and Bingham painting their surroundings as they saw, landscape depiction was becoming more of a personal endeavor. This opened the door for future artists to explore other styles and genres from a more personal point of view.

The New York based Abstract Expressionists were highly influenced by the sequence of art periods that became more and more personal - from Turner and the Romantics to Monet and Impressionism and more. The term Abstract Expressionism was first applied to Wassily Kandinsky (a Russian who painted in Germany) and other German Expressionists in approximately 1929. Free flowing and sometimes aggressive brushwork was consistently used by artists in both Europe and America. The post-war American Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky are just some of the artists from this period. Life was changing quickly and dramatically on an international level as people searched to find their place in the world after the war.

Another artist in the U.S. who was associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement was Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) who lived in California. Diebenkorn was a long time personal favourite of mine and I continue to draw much inspiration from his work (both abstract and referential imagery). In his landscapes you can see his application of brush strokes, his smearing of colours into other colours, and his emotional connection to his subject. His numerous paintings in the series Albuquerque or Berkley were his attempt to understand his own surroundings, executed in a personal, gestural and sometimes hard-edged manner that doesn’t necessarily look like a landscape. Diebenkorn was influenced by Cezanne, Mondrian, and Matisse who were of course influenced by their predecessors of art. Although Diebenkorn learned and mastered what he could in the Abstract Expression genre, after a time he became disenchanted with it as it no longer suited his artistic needs



**Any artist worth their salt, is always evolving, searching, and exploring. The investment of themselves in their paintings, and the connection each artist has in the execution of their work brings great strength to the finished canvas. This strength reveals the artist's individual personality, intrigues the viewer, draws them into the work, and allows an emotional connection to the art.**

**To continue exploring this topic have a look at the recommended reading list.**



**Albuquerque - 1951**

Richard Diebenkorn 1922- 1993



**Cityscape I, Landscape No. 1 - 1963**

Richard Diebenkorn 1922- 1993



**Hunters in the Snow the Elder - 1565**

Pieter Bruegel 1525- 1569

‘All paintings start out of a mood, out of a relationship with things or people, out of a complete visual impression’.

- Richard Diebenkorn

Artists continually explore their inner personal landscape, often in very conceptual ways. However, the basic landscape inspiration for many artists over the past few centuries has been nature and their own personal connection to it.

