



Summary

A Plein Air Revolution in the 18th Century? Reports on the Birth of Modern Landscape

The book opens with the questions: Since when have we been painting in plein air? Should this revolutionary change be placed in the Enlightenment? Since the times of Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer drawing in plein air has been quite natural for the Italians and northern artists. Landscape oil sketches were made by Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velazquez, Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorrain, Gaspard Dughet and François Desportes. They were not invented in the Age of Enlightenment, even if – to the best of our knowledge – before that period they had not been a noticeable phenomenon. As Peter Galassi observed “they did not make history, tradition until the end of the 18th century.” Until quite recently, in the history of painting, they were seen – mostly by the Anglo-Saxon scholars professing a modern paradigm and therefore seeking mainly the harbingers of modernity (Philip Conisbee, Lawrence Gowing, John Gage, Galassi) as a factor cutting through classical landscape conventions and undermining its place in the hierarchy of genres. And yet, even the list of names of the 17th century painters and the statements of their contemporary biographers (André Félibien, Filippo Baldinucci, Giovanni Battista Passeri, Joachim von Sandrart) make us perceive this innovation as an appropriate complement to the convention and its enrichment, not so unusual for the 16th and 17th century painters. Undoubtedly, painting (and not only drawing) in plein air became popular in the second half of the 18th century, especially in the international milieu in Rome as a result of the exchange of experiences between its representatives. Plein air painting at that time might have been perceived as a “driving force”, opposed not only by the conservative, but also reformed concepts of historical landscape painting. To put it simply, around 1750 the most known and acclaimed (also in different European countries) landscapists working in Italy, such as Antonio Canale, Giovanni Paolo Panini, Claude-Joseph Vernet, made pleinairism a possible and necessary stage of creating the picture of the Italian world, seen as a work of higher importance than attributed to this genre in the academic hierarchy. This attitude was shared by the first outstanding plein air painters: Thomas Jones, Simon Denis and Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes – the latter also in his theoretical essay written at the end of the century. Since the 17th century Italy saw the development of the so called *veduta presa dal luogo*, influenced by the Dutch Italianate painters and then Gaspar van Wittel, which can be regarded as the beginnings of the European plein air painting. Over the course of the 18th century, pleinairism turned into a major cultural trend, which was remarkably diverse; painting in plein air was just one of its components. The five chapters of the book attempt to report this process, each from a different perspective and independent of the others. They show pleinairism as a dynamic,

irregular and even paradoxical process, since in the cultural dimension it bore witness to opposing attitudes towards nature: its submission and taming, subordination and power.

CHAPTER 1. Experiencing Landscape in the 18th Century. Tourists, Students, Artists in Plein Air

Three main issues presented in this chapter are illustrated with numerous examples of drawings, paintings, engravings and statements of the artists. The first is the new “social structure” of the staffage in landscape paintings. In the 18th century landscape paintings are populated with single, paired or grouped observers, admirers – among them there are often explorers, archeologists, draughtsmen, painters, usually working and thus leaving the staffage and participating in the unfolding scene. They create a new form of a traditional *storia*, as their real presence and activity make a neutral view interesting and worth capturing. The time aspect of this “happening” of the picture, the relationship between human and nature is built on different principles than in, for example, Poussin’s paintings. Such figures as a draughtsman working against the landscape occasionally appeared since the 16th century, but since the mid-18th century, the motif was present in hundreds of European works only to disappear quickly in the first decades of the 19th century. The author analyses several schemes of using this motif, as well as particular works in which it was of exceptional rank (Richard Wilson, Hubert Robert, Anton Graff).

The second discussed issue is the introduction of plein air field trips in academies and art schools from the beginning of the 18th century: in the Académie de France in Rome, in the circle of Johann Georg Wille in Paris and through the students of this German engraver and art dealer in Bern, Vienna and Dresden. This practice contributed substantially to promoting landscape painting in many environments, even if the purpose of the trips was not educating landscape painters. It can also be considered one of the most important factors in reforming artistic education in Europe in the Enlightenment.

The third problem explored in the chapter concerns the conditions of plein air works at its beginnings. What was indeed *nach der Natur, d’après Nature* painting? It comprised both short, single sessions and repeated plein airs (e.g. in the same place at the same time on two or more consecutive days), dependent on the conditions, such as, for example, heat and bright light in Italy, often mentioned by artists. The annotations on the works (sometimes on the reverse) or notes in the diaries or letters constitute a fruitful, yet still rough chronicle of the analysed revolution. The information and reflection on technical issues such as an oil sketch, gouache, etc. are of utmost importance in this chronicle.

CHAPTER 2. Research, Scientific and Conquest Pleinairism. 18th Century Painters on a Special Mission

Similarly to scholars of the Enlightenment, who were more willing to travel the world and gained research material in direct contact with nature, artists became explorers and quite frequently took part in joint expeditions. Some painters did archeological, botanical, etc. research, assembled collections of minerals and exotic objects, documented their expeditions. Artists participating in such ventures usually had their designated tasks and did not to conform to the period rules of the artistic culture. In order to address the tasks, often in the travel circumstances dictating the pace and technique of the work, the artists broke

the accepted norm of a “good painting” (as can be seen in the works of William Hodges, John Webber, Jean-Pierre-Laurent Houël, Caspar Wolf). The author emphasizes the need to treat such projects (many of which are still poorly explored) as a whole, without separating scientific and artistic cognition.

CHAPTER 3. The Spectacle of Nature. Painters and “the New World” – Volcanoes, Glaciers, Waterfalls

Volcanoes, glaciers and waterfalls, almost absent in earlier art, become immensely popular in the second half of the 18th century. Thus, painters are forced to adopt new approaches such as learning about these phenomena from personal observation, from close up, often in extremely difficult conditions; they also use new painting methods, resign from learned conventions. Some artists specialize, e.g. Pierre-Jacques Volaire repeating the motif of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, others paint series of volcanic (Jakob Philipp Hackert, Joseph Wright of Derby) or waterfall (Johann Ludwig Aberli, William Turner) views. Having been conventionalized and commercialized, such motifs will quickly pass in the first decades of the 19th century. In this mass of paintings some masterpieces stand out, characterized by an extraordinary power of expression, which also bear witness to the painters’ efforts to show the phenomenon (e.g. Wright of Derby and Michael Wutky painting night eruptions, Wolf and Johann Heinrich Wuest – glaciers, Erik Pauelsen and Turner – waterfalls). Reciprocal contacts between the artists painting Vesuvius (in Naples), the Tivoli Waterfalls or the Grindelwald Glacier encouraged the exchange of experiences and ideas and promoted certain artistic formulas.

CHAPTER 4. To Unlearn Art. 18th Century Painters on the Journey Again

A journey became one of the most important elements of education in the 18th century. Most pleinairism “founding” works were created during trips, on the journey, as the result of its experience, influenced by movement and change and not as images produced at an *a priori* target point. Thus, the journey can be perceived as a factor promoting education backwards, i.e. unlearning the rules and conventions. William Gilpin was not the only one who stressed the importance of continuous discovery by the painter, the surprise effect, the meaning of the love of novelty. Attilio Brilli coined the term *petit tour*, an “offshoot” of the Grand Tour, whose aim was to discover unknown wilderness, places no one had seen before. The birth of pleinairism can be seen not only as exiting into nature with a sketch, palette and easel, but also as transition from stillness and closure of the painter to experiencing movement and openness – as “the art of the journey”. The author analyses the search for new painting formulas, conditioned by the journey and the shock of constant discoveries, on several examples (mainly of John Robert Cozens and early travels of Turner). As Pierre Wat wrote: “For Turner the journey is to a lesser extent a place of discovery, it is rather a moment of forgetting [...], as the learnt art is replaced by another experience, whose power of deconstructing knowledge and academic skills is enormous”.

CHAPTER 5: A Modern Artist in Search for Identity. The Self-portraits of Landscapists, Views out of the Window

Werner Busch wrote about landscape sketches made by Thomas Jones and Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes from the windows of their apartments in Naples and Rome in the 80s of the 18th century: “The banality [...] of these views is raised [...] by referring to the artist himself; it is his view, [the artist] documents his own space-time situation”. The so called “window” paintings are analysed here, starting from those which are not lands de facto landscapes such as the drawing by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein showing young Goethe in the window of his apartment in Rome, *Views from the Artist’s Atelier* by Caspar David Friedrich or quite exceptional *Self-portrait with the View of Mont Blanc* by Jean-Étienne Liotard. A special place is occupied by the “accidental” gallery of views of Neapolitan brickwork and roofs by Jones. The author discusses window portraits and self-portraits of artists, quite frequent at the turn of the 18th century, concentrates on the images of artists working in plein air, especially self-portraits of painters or their colleagues bearing witness to self-thematic reflection in the context of landscape imagining. The poses of the portrayed and their painting or drawing gear are worth analyzing as the identification components of a modern pleinairist.

Lonely and meaningful figures from Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* and the painter in a grotto of *The Interieur of the Baerenhoehle Near Welschenrohr* by Wolf close the reflections on the “self” of a landscapist.

Instead of an Ending, or What Was Not in Question

Most of the phenomena described here were completely unknown or considered unwanted by the history of art a few decades ago. Those which circulated were granted this right, because heralding more important artistic phenomena, they took place before them. Some were brought to light only as artistic phenomena of the period the “artistic period” (to which they did not necessarily belonged), other are not well-known. In order to understand the specificity of this type of phenomena, to study the problem of “pleinairism” raised here, we need to build a network. They make a mosaic of seemingly unrelated facts, yet we find more and more threads between them. The influence of a particular thinker or theoretician did not necessary make a painter to act in a certain way. But the house of an influential thinker, scholar or writer (such as Joseph Banks, Georg Forster, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, Jakob Wyttenbach) could be a meeting place for artists, where they would exchange views and tips on places and motifs. Some joint expeditions of scholars and artists are mentioned in the book. Zurich, Geneva, Tivoli and Naples were – as it is known – the centres of new thinking about nature and its describing and imagining. There are still many names and dates missing on such a map.

Did landscape “revolution” not consist mainly of problematization of the landscape (not only in art and imagining), of meditation on it? Even if it happened incidentally, during another discussion on the origin of glaciers, exotic flora or habits of the Polynesians? Or even not during a discussion, but in the minds of the draughtsmen, painters themselves, who faced motifs and tasks unprecedented before. We have few data concerning the intellectual horizon of many employers or initiators of the travels, the artists travelling to Italy or the Alps, or the *episteme* of the whole circles.

The book presenting incomplete reports on the fundamental anthropological transformation omits many of its manifestations. The activities of draughtsmen and painters in the service of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic armies are still completely unrecognized. Garden art and its relations to the ideas of landscape painting, the role of theoretical texts and garden practice in forming the concept of the “view” could be material for several separate books. Tracing the perception of garden solutions which shape vision formulas and analysing emotions related to them seem especially interesting. Little do we know about the feeling of the landscape present in images, the perception of such transferred nature (and the cultural heritage). A wide research area covers the reception of old, mainly 17th century painters in the 18th century: Claude Lorraine, Nicolaes Berchem, Jacob van Ruisdael and other Dutch painters, Salvator Rosa. Many detailed findings have been already made, but what was the role of private, royal art collections and museums in a given cultural area as depositories of landscapes in the works of art, copied and influencing artists in the region or milieu? Pleinairism drew from the 17th century landscapists; following in the footsteps of Lorraine as a pleinairist (as well as Rosa) justified new attitudes of the painters working in Italy in the second half of the 18th century. It is a certain paradox: drawing from or even emulating old masters, the painters disobeyed the existing order when art was built on emulating old masters. A new attitude towards nature – that of a tourist, traveller – was created through perception of discovered real views as parallel to Ruisdael’s or Lorraine’s paintings.

As for the “birth of a view” it would be appropriate to simultaneously reflect on the Enlightenment beginnings of a public museum, seen as a modern temple of a fragment, a place like Lauterbrunnen Valley or English gardens forming audience and a community of viewers. The invention of a panorama and other new media of nascent popular culture are also the hallmarks of this revolution.

If the landscape painting was admitted to a museum, a temple or a palace, does it mean landscape as a genre reached its maturity? Before Friedrich’s landscape was hung in the castle chapel in Děčín, many European residences had been filled with landscape paintings. Some of them, e.g. Jakob Phillip Hackert’s *Views of The Kingdom of Naples*, the so called *Rosa Zimmer* in Schönbrunn, a room in the White House in Łazienki Park in Warsaw, Bernardo Bellotto’s room in the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Badhaus in Schwetzingen Gardens still require a study in this respect. This book almost completely omits the analysis of popular illustrated publications promoting mountains and other picturesque attractions of different countries, all *voyages pittoresques* etc. They created a market, the demand for the works of landscapists, which forced the painters to search for new, unknown, unfamiliar motifs and scenes. Today, even if we do not see evidence of live relation with nature in the graphic material, we should remember that their drawing or painting foundations were laid during journeys, trips, work in plein air. The Enlightenment search for what is native, different formulas of a “political” landscape – the British and Swiss ones have been fully described, local searches in other areas are only partially known – are yet to be described. Finally, perhaps the most difficult research problem is the multisensory aspect of travel discoveries and experiences: there are descriptions of the rumbles of Vesuvius, the smell of sulphur from the crater of Solfatara, but also the echoes in the Ear of Dionysius cave. Including all these threads would undoubtedly change the image of the landscape art in the 18th century and also the aspects of pleinairism which were discussed here. But it is not a synthetic and steady image we should strive for.

Translated by Bożena Lesiuk