

# LOOKING AT LANDSCAPE

**Painting is not about copying in detail what you see before you.**

For hundreds of years painters have considered in detail all aspects of composition, colour relationships and how to represent the effects of light. As artists these formal elements are still our main concern and are important considerations when planning your paintings. Painting is not about copying in detail what you see before you. You are creating something new; a painting which will stand alone on the strength of its composition, colour selection, painting technique and its emotional and intellectual input. If we look at landscape in a more informed way it can take us along paths where you make decisions about these elements with understanding and reason. You will create paintings which are more original, work with more confidence and hopefully progress more rapidly.

Perhaps the most popular and enduring form of landscape painting is the essentially the romantic, nostalgic and often rural, picturesque image. Based around classic themes like farm buildings, bridges, fields and rolling hills, fishing boats in the harbour etc. the picturesque image warms the heart, satisfies the eye and looks good over the fireplace. It is understandable that many people find the idea of these paintings a good starting point for their own work but there is a danger of simply imitating images you have seen before. You can still paint the picturesque but to choose your own path as a result of a little research and understanding can help you focus and lead to a much more exciting, creative and enjoyable way of painting.

If we look at a variety of ways to think about painting landscape it may help you identify your own preferences and then you can establish your own personal approach.

## ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is a descriptive term in painting which can be used to describe the work of many artists from different periods in Art history. The actual Romantic period took place from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and describes the music, poetry, literature and Art of that time with important painters like Turner and Constable. Essentially romantic painting creates an emotional response. The classic picturesque falls into this category. Many paintings of this time were quite dramatic and theatrical by nature and perhaps the most impressive example is Turner. He would sketch on site collecting valuable and essential information but back in the studio he created great paintings manipulating elements at will to suit his own personal vision. In his later work he took this to the limit by trying to capture the spiritual charge one can feel amidst large mountains or being close to a powerful sea. In pursuit of his goal he focused on light and atmosphere often losing all trace of detail to produce some wonderful paintings. His work was way ahead of its time and to some degree he pioneered the way toward abstraction.

Everybody will have their own personal vision of a romantic image but research into Romantic painters can be fascinating. Identifying your own dreams and personal preferences for places or types of landscape is a good start. Your pictorial answers do not have to be totally realistic. Remember you are entering into a world of wishful thinking and you are making the rules. Use your sketch book like a scrap book, they are a great way of collecting all sorts of information and this can be an essential way of developing your thinking. Avoid sentimentality if possible.

Artist reference: Girtin, Turner, Constable, James Pryde, William Blake, Edwin Landseer, The Pre-Raphaelites, Whistler.....

## REALISM

An antidote to Classicism and Romanticism, *Realism tells it how it is*. In Landscape the subject matter chosen by the realist painter is likely to be more hard edged and uncompromising; industrialised landscapes; old

factories or pit heads, allotments, derelict buildings or abandoned machinery or even the battle fields of war.

Your approach may be that of a dispassionate observer recording what you see or maybe you would prefer to express your feelings or make social comment. The subject does not have to be morbid or negative; you may love the old canal or the allotments. Sometimes a silent landscape without human presence but bearing witness to the effects of man can be all the more powerful.

Realism is an approach which has all the potential for a personal and strong individual response. Your technique, composition and colour will tend to sympathetically fall into place with your idea. If your ideas are powerful then it naturally follows your method of painting and choice of colours will go the same way. Realism of course implies that you need to take your information directly from the real subject.

Artist reference : Velasquez, Courbet, Delacroix, Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer, John Bratby, Lucien Freud.....

## EXPRESSIONISM

Perhaps still one of the most powerful and clear example of this type of painting is to be found in the work of Van Gogh. He was a Post Impressionist who ploughed his own furrow and could be described as the grandfather of Expressionism which developed in Germany and Austria some 20 years later. He distorted or emphasised his shapes and used dramatic colour and conveyed his passion through the very act of painting. Locked into Van Gogh's brushstrokes you are able to feel the very energy and strong emotion he must have experienced while painting. The thread of Expressionism can be seen throughout the twentieth century often used as a means of expressing anger and frustration at many wrongs we have witnessed as a result of wars and social injustice within our society in the twentieth century.

With landscape we can sometimes feel the energy of a place. Nature is dynamic; trees and plants are growing, water moves, wind blows and the weather changes. For some people who feel this, a static representation of the landscape does not work. The sensation they feel in a place is part of the landscape. Using strong colour and applying paint with the same energy with which you might execute a quick sketch can be one way of capturing the sensation of the moment. Your response will be intuitive and personal.

It is great to paint on site without inhibition. Identify the essence of the landscape before you start painting, if you like, priming your emotions with essential information. The criteria for choosing colours may have nothing to do with the colours you observe although the observed colours might suggest colour combinations you feel like using. Respond intuitively to shapes with your brushwork and stay fresh. Some of the best Artwork is to be found in a sketch book where your evidence is recorded intuitively and spontaneously in the form of quick drawings. Try and paint with the same freedom and energy as your drawings.

Artist reference : Van Gogh, Kokoshka, Roualt, Vlaminck, Egon Scheile, David Bomberg.....

## ANALYSIS

Analysis is a cold word but a very productive way to look at landscape; seeing it very much in terms of the formal elements ie. structure, composition, colour and light. This approach to landscape is exciting because it demands more original input from the artist. The thinking behind it can be inspirational but also logical because it is based on a sound knowledge of composition, colour relationships and painting techniques. Because you are 'abstracting' information that interests you from the landscape and then developing your ideas through process, this is actually one way of working toward abstraction.

You often see something in landscape that catches your eye. It may be a collection of shapes that work well together - fields bordered by walls or hedges, footpaths and steps that create good composition when captured in

the rectangle ( a rectangular viewer can be a good way to isolate and clarify possible composition.) Or you may be excited by colour combinations you see - purple moorland, dark blue grey sky with low ochre sunset, or the interplay of reflected colours and shadows on a white wall. The simple act of identifying what you like about a landscape can focus your thinking eg. The shapes you saw in the fields will allow you to work on a finely tuned composition drawing. Maybe do a series of thumbnail sketches of various possibilities. Leave out detail that does not contribute to your painting. Choose colours that enhance your composition; maybe a patchwork of blue-greens. They do not have to be the colours you see before you. Remember you are creating a new work of Art which has to work independently of the landscape. It will be judged more on its good composition, colour arrangement etc. not in the accurate recording of detail.

Artist reference : John Sell Cotman, Cezanne, Whistler, Lionel Feininger, Wyndham Lewis, Matisse, Ben Nicholson, Victor Pasmore, Edward Hopper, Picasso.....

## LIGHT AND COLOUR

Light and colour have always been a fundamental concern of the artist. The essential problem is trying to represent the subtlety or intensity of light and colour within the limitations of the media. The pigments used in manufactured paint are only approximations of colours and all react in different ways when mixed together. Over hundreds of years of practice artists have developed understanding of colour relationships and how colours behave in various media. In Turner's later work we can perhaps see the first example of where the focus on light, atmosphere and colour actually become the central concern in the painting. Forty years later there were further advances in colour theory and with the Impressionists and we see exciting developments in the use of colour and light in the work of artists such as Monet and Seurat. They painted outside in order to accurately see the colours. They broke up colour into its component parts and used the properties of complementary colours applied in small dabs of paint to represent the intensity of light. It was a time of experiment and was really the birth of modern Art. The Impressionists radically changed the way

artists record what they see. Later with artists like Cezanne, Matisse and the Fauves we see a more significant break with the need to simply represent the observed colours of nature. Picasso opened up another line of thought by deliberately using the psychological characteristics of colour in his Blue and Rose periods.

Retracing the footsteps and employing the thinking and methods of any of these artists can be an exciting learning process. Light and colour alone could be the driving force in your painting or colour and pattern as in the work of Matisse. Detail becomes irrelevant as you deal with shapes and colour relationships. If you recognise that light alone can describe form then this is another possible line of enquiry.

Artist reference: Turner, Monet, Seurat, Renoir, John Singer Sargent, Sorolla, Matisse, the Fauves, Paul Klee.....

## FORM

Landscape consists of form and structure. Typically we can see buildings, trees or rocks set against hills and mountains. The sculptor Henry Moore saw the same shapes in bones and roots as he saw in landscape or the human form. Some of his reclining figures directly echo the shapes to be found in the sea cliffs of the north Yorkshire coast. His contemporary Barbara Hepworth also recognised the same shapes in landscape as she saw in smaller natural forms. The drawings of sculptors often have a magical quality. They are drawn by one who sees the world in three dimensions but momentarily choose to make a representation in two dimensions. More recently there are artists whose paintings directly deal with form in landscape; the vast sloping fields of corn seen in mid west America by Wyeth, the stylized but beautiful representations of the rolling hills of the South Downs, fine detailed studies of the gritstone edges of Derbyshire.

Simplified form becomes an open door for you to experiment with light colour and texture to describe the shapes you see.

## IMAGINED OR REMEMBERED LANDSCAPE

Landscape is often the stage set for our dreams; either asleep or awake. The surrealists often created paintings where the unexpected can exist side by side on an imagined landscape. The naive but complex images of Chagall are landscapes from the mind with floating images of all things important to him.

Your approach does not have to be as surreal as Dali. Some modern painters enjoy working with the idea of remembered landscapes, maybe from places they remember as a child. These landscapes from our early life stay in our mind for a long time and are constantly reinforced; images of woods, old lanes and derelict buildings, allotments, rivers, railways and hidden paths; wonderful places to revisit. Also we can see landscapes passing quickly through the window of a train or a car; the caravan in the trees with no visible road or the long forgotten garden....fleeting images for only a second but as we subconsciously select them they can grow in our imagination especially if we pass them often on a regular journey.

In the urban landscapes we can walk old streets at night with high walls and mature trees, parks with railings and memorials.....ghosts from another generation. Ref. Carel Weight

In large cities there are the ghosts of the living - the anonymous people you will never know. The paintings by Lucien Feud of the back of blocks of flats in London seem like a curious window into the lives of people you will never know but in fact tell you nothing, they just leave you with the mystery.

Only you will know what is your imaginary landscape and nobody can tell you how to paint it because there are no rules.

Artist reference: Dali, Magritte, Chagall, Stanley Spencer, Graham Sutherland, Carel Weight, Kathryn Hobden, George Shaw.....

## INTO ABSTRACTION

Only a few artists move into abstraction with ease; for them they do not feel the need to cling to a recognisable reality, their new abstract image is the reality. It is unlikely, simply by definition that you would produce *pure* abstract work based on a real landscape. The aspects of landscape which are the starting point for a process of abstraction are likely to still be present

to some degree in the conclusion. The connecting thread alone back to reality makes the work semi abstract.

Absolutely any element in landscape can be a starting point for a move towards abstraction; a group of lines or shapes, a colour, a mood, an idea, a memory.....You could develop your ideas in a series of progressive or investigative studies developing the idea toward a final piece or if you prefer you could start with the ultimate piece in an effort to maintain spontaneity. A piece like this inevitably takes on a life of its own, moved on by a combination of the considered and inspirational decisions made by the artist in conversation with and as a result of, the feed back generated by the image itself. It is amazing, or perhaps frustrating that even with the freedom available in abstraction that many abstract paintings still work mainly because the formal elements of composition and colour are in balance. For painters that would love to be freed from the constraints of representing a real world, but find abstraction a mystery, the analytical approach is a good starting point. It is then a matter of developing a critical visual language where you feel comfortable talking about quality and relationships of lines, balance of tones and beautiful areas of texture etc....and resist the urge to move back towards the comfort zone of reality.

## TECHNIQUE

Whatever line of thought you choose to follow, ultimately technique becomes an issue. It can in fact be the central issue in your work or at least an important means of achieving your other objectives. The choice of media is a very personal decision but it is always good to experiment and open up other possibilities for yourself. You can learn a lot from visiting galleries to examine the work of artist from past and the present. The techniques of the old masters were often complex especially with oil paintings. It is possible to spend a long time looking at a single square inch of a Turner painting recognizing the magic and trying to work out how he did it. In more contemporary work artists often use quite unconventional media or combinations of media and it is good to learn from them also. The work of a number of recent landscape artists and modern illustrators relies on quite

novel and refined methods of using certain media or mixing media resulting in a definite personal style.

Learn from others and experiment yourself but remember there is no quick fix in learning how to use any new media; it takes time, practice and enthusiasm to learn the subtleties. Turner would work on as many as twenty watercolour paintings at one time experimenting with the fine tuning and ultimately controlling of the happy accidents that are characteristic of the media.

Your own approach to painting could follow one or more of the suggested ways of looking at landscape.

Research into the reference artist's work can be enlightening and enjoyable especially if this involves visiting galleries to see the actual paintings and examine technique.

It is good to collect reference material, written or visual from anything that speaks to you; a sketch book is a visual diary which can be the backbone of your work. Your line of research may lead you to specific places and then it is the time to record. Cameras can be a good additional way of collecting information but **there is no substitute for sitting in the front of the landscape with all your senses open and exposed to what you can see and feel.**

Visualizing

Thinking

Drawing

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*Tom Brown*