

UNST 124g fall 2011

landscape

1 introduction

René Magritte explained to his audience in a 1938 lecture ¹ for the Muse Royal des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp that his painting *La Condition humaine* shows us how we see the world. “We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside.” In this, he asserts that how we *understand* ourselves to experience the world around us is conditioned by our culture. We can see a parallel here with Margaret Mead’s conclusion ² that culture shapes our experiences of the world but Magritte reasons one step farther, suggesting that the heart of the matter is not the experience itself but how we conceptualize the experience. We need an intellectual and emotional framework ready to receive what our eyes capture before we can see a landscape as an object that might be classified as beautiful (or frightening, or something else). When understood in this way, Magritte says, our notion that the landscape (or the environment) is somehow external to us is absurd. The whole idea of landscape as an object springs entirely from within ourselves.

Dan Flores (1998) argues that ideas about the value of nature have changed throughout human history, due in part to the development and use of new technologies—from plows to power plants—but also in reaction to those developments. He uses the Romantic Movement’s response to the Industrial Revolution to make this point. Indeed, the monumental paintings of western scenes by Romantic Era artists like Albert Bierstadt defined easterners’ vision of the west and played a role in the preservation of western lands.

2 assignment

This assignment has two parts. First, you are asked to visit the Portland Art Museum (PAM) to observe several paintings in the permanent collection. Landscape is an important component in each painting. Second, you are asked to prepare group presentations for the class, in which you **discuss how landscape is represented and used in a painting you find in the PAM collection**. How—if at all—does the artist want you to feel about the landscape? How is the landscape used to convey meaning?

2.1 visiting the museum

The Portland Art Museum is on the south Park Blocks, 1219 SW Park Avenue, quite close to campus. If you have not already purchased a college student pass, please do so before class meets October 10th. You will meet your mentor on the steps leading to the museum entrance at 9:30

¹As quoted in Schama (1995), p. 12.

²As described in her 1953 essay for the *This I Believe* radio program.

am. Attendance will be taken so please be prompt. Remember that you will need both the college student pass and your student ID to enter the museum. Once inside, find the paintings identified below and proceed from there. Photography is allowed in much of the museum and signs indicate where it is not.

After class, you will work with your mentor session group to prepare the presentation described above. Two groups will be formed in each session, for a total of six groups (and thus six presentations in class). You will return to the PAM with your group in order to refine your ideas for the presentation.

2.2 presentations

The group presentations will be given in class the week following the museum visit. The presentation should be made using a presentation software of some kind, Keynote, Powerpoint, or another. The presentation should contain two images: the primary painting you select at the museum and one other image that you use to add detail to your interpretation, in the way you would add evidence in the body of an essay. The second image may be another painting, a photograph of a natural scene, or another image that in some way helps your group to interpret the primary painting. The primary painting may be from the list below or may be another you find during your visit. As long as landscape is part of the story, a painting not in the idea list is fine.

2.3 some paintings to find

- Mercury and Argus, Bonaventura Peeters I, 1644. *Is that forest an inviting place? What's up with the goat behind the tree?*
- A Shipwreck, Charles François Lacroix, 1763.
- Marine, William Trost Richards, 1884. *This is a landscape?*
- Mount Hood, Albert Bierstadt, 1869. *This is Mount Hood?*
- Psycho Spaghetti Western #6, Ed Ruscha, 2010 (and others in the series). *The artist said in an interview that he views these objects in terms of geology.*
- Memorial Day Wildflower Bouquet in the Cemetery of an Abandoned Western Mining Town, Morris Graves, 1936. *Graves is grouped with the Depression-era "Northwest School."*
- Fir Trees, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, ca. 1925.
- Central Park, Max Weber, 1920-21.
- Landscape Panorama scroll, Shen Zhau, 1477.

3 references

Flores, Dan. (1998). *A sense of the American west*. Spirit of place and the value of nature in the American west (pp. 31-40) J.S. Sherow (Ed.). University of New Mexico Press.

Shama, S. (1995). *Landscape and memory*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.