

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE LANDSCAPE AND THE EXPRESSION OF INTIMACY

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The purpose of this paper is to show that the emergence of the landscape as an art form and as a literary theme was accompanied by a correlative interest in indoor scenes. It is as if the broadening of vision implied by landscape awareness elicited an interest in closed space and home life as the setting where one worked and where one thought. Large prospects, it seems, developed an interest in the mind's eye. But when did this actually happen?

Anybody will admit that there were intimate links between the landscape and the inner thoughts of man in the Romantic age. Wordsworth defined the Lake District as “a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (qtd. in Sedwick, 176). Anybody will also admit that the direct affective transfer from the landscape to the sensibility of the beholder is clearly perceptible from the Renaissance onwards because the word ‘landscape’ in the modern sense of a picture showing an area of land appeared in the sixteenth century in the languages of Western Europe.

But one can also think that this emotional transfer existed from the start, from Greek and Roman times, from the early development of landscape as an art form in Europe. This is what I tried to prove in my book *Naissance et renaissance du paysage*. My purpose today is not to survey the ups and downs of a very long history. It is to concentrate on the 1350-1450 period to see what happened in Italy and Flanders *before* the term ‘landscape’ actually existed. I hope I shall be able to prove that from its earliest beginnings, from its inception, the landscape generated a renewed interest in domestic scenes and intimate thoughts for reasons which I shall try to clarify.

I will start from the famous frescoes painted in the Palazzo pubblico of Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in 1348. [FIG.35 and FIG. 36] It will be remembered that the two frescoes, one showing the city as an urban landscape, the other the Sienese countryside, were painted at the time when Petrarch described his famous ascension of Mont Ventoux (1336):

On n’aperçoit pas de là la chaîne des Pyrénées, ces limites de la France et de l’Espagne, non qu’il y ait quelque obstacle que je sache mais à cause de la faiblesse de la vue humaine. On voyait très bien à

droite les montagnes de la province lyonnaise, et à gauche la mer de  
Marseille et celle qui baigne Aigues-Mortes, distantes de quelques  
journées. Le Rhône était sous nos yeux. (95) <sup>1</sup>

Then, wishing to uplift his thoughts as high as the mountain on which he stood, he opened a copy of St Augustine's *Confessions* and he read:

Les hommes s'en vont admirer la hauteur des montagnes, les grandes  
agitations de la mer, le vaste cours des fleuves, la circonférence  
de l'océan, les évolutions des astres et ils s'oublient eux-mêmes.  
(Pétrarch, 96) <sup>2</sup>

That a great writer and a great painter described the local particulars of a large landscape almost at the same time is a remarkable concurrence of literature and of the arts, a striking illustration of the Image/Language interface in the fourteenth century. But while Petrarch clearly establishes a connection between introspection and the landscape, it remains to be proved that Ambrogio Lorenzetti does the same in his *Good Government*.

To answer this question we have to turn to the origins of landscape painting. All the dictionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries point out the fact that 'landscape' is a term originally used by painters and fallen into common use. The rapid extension of its circulation is sufficient evidence of its impact on mental attitudes. To survey a large extent of the earth's surface was fast becoming an intellectual need. Important events in intellectual history never happen by chance. During the thirteenth century, momentous transformations had taken place in Europe: commercial exchanges had grown rapidly under the leadership of the city-states of Italy. They involved the Middle East and northern Europe and they prompted in turn significant changes in the intellectual life of the period (Crombie, 1: 54-71, *passim*).

The universities could not remain indifferent to such transformations because the students were eager to learn about the changes taking place everywhere around them. Many of them belonged

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<sup>1</sup> "From where we stood we could not see the Pyrenees, the mountains which separate Spain from France, not because of any obstacle, for as far as I know, there is none, but because of the weakness of the human eye. On the right hand side, the mountains of the province of Lyons could clearly be seen; so was the seashore at Marseilles and at Aigues Mortes, a few days' walk away. The Rhone was under our eyes." [my translation]

<sup>2</sup> "Men go on long travels to admire the height of the mountains, the great commotions of the sea, the course of large rivers, the circumference of the ocean and the motions of the stars, but they forget their own selves." [my translation]

to urban families engaged in commercial pursuits and their intellectual curiosity was stimulated by the possibilities offered by arithmetic and geography to develop trade. Hence the conflicts which arose in academic circles between those who were content with university life as it had always been and those who called for a reform of the curriculum.

The Church could not remain indifferent to such conflicts as they threatened its unity. On one side were the traditionalists often to be found among the high clergy and the well established monastic orders, such as the Clunians; on the other, were the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans who censured the affluence and the conservative attitude of their adversaries. They called for an *aggiornamento* which had already developed surreptitiously among intellectuals. I shall use as an example the representation of the sky, a subject of direct interest for landscape historians.

For a long time, say from the Church Fathers onwards, the sky was conceived as the visible part of the superior waters which separated the world as we see it from the spiritual world of God and of the angels — hence in medieval iconography, the countless representations of the hand of God reaching through the clouds to intervene in human affairs. This was a literal interpretation of Genesis where we can read:

And God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.'

And God made the firmament, and divided the Waters which were under the firmament from those which were above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the Heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.'  
(Genesis, 1:6-9)

It was in the twelfth century that, in the *Ecole de Chartres*, a different interpretation of the Scriptures was proposed by Guillaume de Conches and his colleagues. The Scriptures, they said, were to be read metaphorically, not literally. What was meant by "the superior waters" was in fact the clouds from which the rain falls. This interpretation of the Scriptures met with the strong hostility of Saint Bernard and other guardians of orthodoxy. But it made headway in intellectual circles because it presented the stars not as holes in the firmament, but as heavenly bodies possessed of a physical nature whose motion and properties could be studied. This validated the Aristotelian theory of eclipses

which supposed that the earth was round — a fact doubted by Saint Augustine as not to be found in the Scripture “where there is no falsehood” (Saint Augustine, 5: 49-51).<sup>3</sup>

By insisting on a return to Aristotle, the Franciscans and the Dominicans operated a shift in the representation of nature. They substituted observation to contemplation. This led to a revival of optics, for observation requires a study of vision and the Franciscans accordingly resorted to dissection to explain how the eye functioned (Baridon, 312). The connection between this type of research and the arts can be proved by the fact that Giotto did work for the Franciscans at Assisi where the works of John Pecham could be consulted. Pecham, an Oxford Franciscan, tried to explain why the horizon seemed “attached” to the earth and he took into account the fact that the earth extended beyond what we actually perceived of its surface. The Franciscans were no longer looking at the sky and at the surface of the earth in the way the Church Fathers had done. The horizon, as they saw it, supposed that the sky was not a round lid put on a circular surface called the earth, it was the line where the sky *seemed* to touch the earth which in fact extended far beyond.

It was this new world picture, made credible by concrete observation and by the measurements of geometers, which was at work in the representation of landscape as the Siene town council conceived it. The merchants, and more specifically the bankers, knew about Arabic numerals and they tried to improve their knowledge of the geography of Europe and of navigation. They also had ambitions of a more concrete cast. They controlled the political life of the city and of the *campagna*, thus reducing the political role of the nobility whose castles they bought or occupied. Once they had gained control of new possessions they commissioned a painter to provide a picture of them, considering that it would serve as a title-deed.

At the same time, they commissioned geometers to establish a cadastral plan of the city and of the adjacent *campagna*. They did exactly the same thing for Talamone, a harbour on the Tyrrhenian sea, which served as an outlet for their international trade. It is to be noticed that on this cadastral plan the numbers indicating coordinates were in Arabic numerals (X-axis), and Roman numerals (Y-axis). This proves that they had made good use of the tables of Abbacci popularized in Pisa, another city-state and a commercial rival, which was deriving great profit both intellectually and financially from the oriental trade (Redon, 59 sq. and 234 sq.). Such facts show that the Italians of the *trecento* were able to make representations of their city and of the neighbouring *campagna* by means which they considered “scientific.”

Was this objective knowledge of the landscape, both rural and urban, enough to raise emotions in the citizens of Siena? In my view, the answer is yes. Those who lived in the city took pride in the

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<sup>3</sup> On this see Baridon, 228-32.

accurate representation of their activities and of their surroundings. [FIG. 35] Ask any town dweller how he feels about the street in which he lives. Towns are large labyrinths in which one finds one's bearings with a sort of intimate joy. You cross thousands of people, none of them like you, and yet sharing in the life of the same community. In cities more than anywhere else, identity rests on the experience of difference. Besides, the citizens of Siena different as they were from one another, had in common with their neighbours the patriotic feeling of belonging to a city like none other. This also was part of their innermost self. The imagination of these city-dwellers could range as far as the Middle East and even China, for they heard tales about these distant lands; at the same time, they had in mind charming scenes of rural simplicity, happy remembrances of days spent in the neighbouring *campagna* where they had friends and relations who spoke their native dialect, and where they sometimes owned farms to enjoy a break from the stress of the city. They were citizens of the world but they were also *contadini*, Italian peasants. All this can be seen on Lorenzetti's frescoes, including a distant indication of Talamone, the port from which ships left for their long voyages. They show that in Siena, the landscape was an intellectual conquest which enhanced the city-dwellers' interest in the nooks and corners of their native city. To spot the stall of a fellow-merchant on an "official" picture, to see a horseman trying to find his way in a maze of narrow streets they knew very well, all this comforted their pride at the idea that they were the life and blood of a city whose ships sailed to distant countries and whose bankers were respected in Flanders.

It has often been said that the Lorenzetti frescoes were a brilliant yet isolated attempt to create a new genre in painting (Roger, 66). The arguments put forward are the black pest which very probably caused the death of Ambrogio Lorenzetti himself, the financial disasters which caused the downfall of well-established bankers in Italy, and the Hundred Years' war which began in the 1340s. But those are short-sighted views. An artist can create works radiant with energy and *joie de vivre* in the darkest periods of history. Think of Matisse working on *Jazz* (1943) while two-thirds of the country were under German occupation. Things were very much the same during the endless conflict between France on one side, England and the Burgundians on the other. It was in this period that splendid manuscripts commissioned by the duc de Berry, the maréchal de Boucicaut, the kings of France and the dukes of Burgundy saw the light.

These manuscripts represented landscapes, all be it in a stylized form, but the interest in country scenes and urban life was already there. Van Eyck's *bas de page* in the Turin Book of Hours [FIG. 37] shows only the ramparts of a town, but the small group in the foreground is composed of city-dwellers who have come out into the country to watch the scene. Such descriptive *topoi* are also to be found in the literature of the period; I have no time to develop this point as we should have done to conform with the idea behind *Interfaces* of confronting texts and images. I apologize for this but I will

give just one example drawn from Jean Molinet's *Chroniques*. Apart from being a poet in his own right, Jean Molinet was Philippe le Bon's historiographer and he may well have met Jan van Eyck on several occasions. Describing the siege of Nuyse, he gives a clear idea of the centre of the city:

Entre les rues foraines et aultres petites ruelles traversaires, dont il y avoit grant nombre bien compasée par géométrie, y avoit un grant marchié où toutes marchandises et vivres arivoient à grant plenté.<sup>4</sup>  
(Molinet, I: 56)

Molinet's urban landscape evinces the same interest in tradesmen and artisans (he names no less than eighteen different kinds of "ouvriers mécaniques" in his description of Nuyse) as Lorenzetti's view of Siena, a fact which can be explained by the active intellectual exchanges taking place between Flanders and Italy.

The great advances made in optics thanks to the Franciscans of Oxford (John Pecham, Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon) were acknowledged by Siger de Barbant, a Flemish scientist who called for a return to the observation of nature. Ideas followed the route traced by those who transported the wool of English sheep to Flanders and to Florence. The dukes of Burgundy, who were directly interested in North-South exchanges, were, as we have seen, the patrons of Jan van Eyck whom they sent on diplomatic missions. And the very same van Eyck painted Arnolfini, an Italian banker, and his wife in the house they owned in Bruges. He was probably informed of the progress made by geography for he is said to have painted a map of the world (now lost) which made it possible to determine the distance between two cities (Panofsky, 3). This demonstrates the connection between geography and the landscape since Lorenzetti had also painted a map of the whole world displayed in the Palazzo pubblico in Siena (and now also lost) (Cairola & Carli, 139-40).

When an artist like Jan van Eyck passed from manuscript illumination to painting on wooden panels he probably had the impression that he catered for a much wider public. The dukes spoke French and they lived in great, almost offensive, luxury, while he spoke Flemish and lived in a laborious city jealous of its independence and critical of the ruling circles. One knows very little about him but it may be assumed that as a great artist he appreciated the refinement of the court. Yet, at the same time, he was an artisan and a bourgeois and his art expressed his interest in more humble people and his sincere belief in a religion which was part of his life at home and in the city.

It was by its artisans that Flanders had become one of the most prosperous regions of Europe

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<sup>4</sup> "Between the trading streets and the many narrow alleys which ran across them in good geometrical order, there was a great market where goods and victuals arrived in great plenty" [my translation].

and it was as an artisan that van Eyck had risen to eminence. While painting manuscript illuminations he had already experimented with colours and varnishes in a typically empirical way. Later in his career, when he painted for his fellow citizens and for the religious orders of the city, he went on experimenting in order to produce the kind of painting which would wear well and which would show the world as it really was. He knew that, for this public, culture was closely linked with the decoration of churches, a magic world where one could admire statues and stained windows. As a painter who took an active part in church decoration, he had a strong sense of community life. In their guilds, artists discussed matters of common interest and they had the feeling that they were born to live, work and die as city-dwellers. Like their Italian counterparts in Siena, they heard of distant places where most of them would never go. They also had in common their relations in the neighbouring countryside from which they originated. Jan van Eyck himself had been born in the country near Aachen. But there were great differences between Flemish and Italian artists.

Their cultural heritage was not the same. The Italians of the *trecento* discovered the buildings, the statues and the mosaics of the Romans *in situ*. They explored the ruins of ancient Rome with a devotion inspired by patriotism. This was not the case in Flanders where patriotism also existed but was inspired by Gothic art. Quite logically, Jan van Eyck and the painters of his generation, the master of Flemalle for example, used the material accumulated by religious art, the statues and the stained glasses which decorated gothic churches. So that when they came to reside in Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp they realized that to represent what they saw on a panel of wood or on canvas, they could combine the relief of statues with the colours of stained glass. This was made possible by working on pigments to reproduce the diffusion of light in indoor and outdoor scenes. On these artists, born and bred under northern skies, light exerted a fascination explainable by its endless variations and by the belief, to which the stained glasses of the cathedrals testified, that it was an emanation from the deity shining on the Creation in order to reveal its bright colours.

To reach their ends, painters like van Eyck and Campin worked on pigments which rendered the subtle effects of light variations on colours. They did even better. They mastered the art of giving the impression that their paintings were themselves the source of light. This is clearly visible in the famous polyptych of the Holy Lamb in Ghent. [FIG. 38 and 39]

Specialists have not been able to determine the exact nature of van Eyck's discoveries. He probably began by dissolving his pigments in a mix of glue and egg white. Then he varnished his paintings, and it is believed that while experimenting on varnishes — which he obtained by the distillation of gums coming from the Middle East — he came to mix them with his pigments to obtain more consistence and siccative power. This made it possible to superpose layers of paint on the wooden panels he used. But these wooden panels had previously received a white foundation — a thin layer

of plaster and glue — which created effects of transparency because it remained perceptible under the layers of paint. It was as if light made the colours come to life, an effect comparable to that of the stained glasses of the tall windows so characteristic of the flamboyant gothic of the period.

In the Ghent polyptych one can see the results of this new way of representing nature. Lorenzetti's frescoes look flat and colourless compared to the superb skyline and to the deep shadows represented here (Panofsky, 1-3). [FIG. 38] This is a hymn to Creation seen as a whole and illuminated by divine light. At the same time, we can see on the large central meadows no less than forty-two different types of flowers all growing in Flanders. Those flowers were likely to be recognized by those who came to see the picture and they could not fail to awaken in them personal memories of their outings in the country.

The same preoccupation is visible on the polyptych when its panels are closed. [FIG. 39] The grisaille effects clearly reveal their connection with statues but what is more relevant to our theme is the charming, intimate home scene showing a wash basin and a towel near a window overlooking a street. Looking at this very small picture, we feel as if we were silently watching, if not spying on, the life of the city. But we also feel that by turning away from the window we can return to the small sheltered world where we live in the company of familiar objects and familiar thoughts.

I shall end with a brief discussion of the landscape which occupies the centre of the famous picture now in the Louvre, known as the *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin* (ca. 1435) [FIG. 40]. It represents as we all know, the chancellor of Philip the Good, in prayers, kneeling before the Virgin. The main theme of the picture, the donor and the Virgin, has been treated several times by van Eyck but this is the only occasion when the Virgin's throne and canopy do not appear in the centre of the picture. They make room for a landscape showing the meanders of a broad river which leads the eye towards tall mountains on the horizon. On both sides of the river can be seen towns with church spires towering above the houses as if to give them protection, then the countryside with fields, roads and forests. A bridge spans the river, its arches reflected by the shining water.

In less than a century, what a striking change in the representation of a river when we compare Lorenzetti's river with van Eyck's! The brilliance of the water is now admirably brought forward by the painter's command of the diffusion of light over the landscape. But this should not blind us to the similarities evidenced by the two paintings; for, as in Lorenzetti's fresco, politics and the sphere of the intimate clearly interfere in the van Eyck painting. It seems highly probable that it was the personality of the donor which determined the choice of the landscape as the central motif of the picture. Rolin was a kind of vizier to Philip the Good of Burgundy; he was a very powerful man known to be inflexible, highly competent, and not very religious. He is shown kneeling and in prayers as if he was placing the dukedom under the protection of the Virgin. At the same time, he holds a commanding position in his

palace. But this general view does not exclude details, and it is in details that the painter's interest in the humble life of ordinary people can be found.

In the cities represented on both sides of the rivers, squares can be seen with small figures hurrying to and fro. This reminds us of Molinet's description of Nuyse quoted previously. Roads are visible on the hills far away, while much closer, peacocks and less distinguished birds meet in the small garden planted with roses and common flowers. On the crenellated rampart adjacent to the garden, two fellows are idling away their time while the chancellor's mind is bent on higher thoughts. [Fig. 41] One of them is taking a look at the river far below. He seems so intent on what he is doing that he looks slightly foolish, but this piece of comic relief serves two ends. It gives the picture a third dimension, profundity, which is admirably suggested, and it brings the picture nearer to everyday life and to familiar scenes. And familiar scenes, as we have seen, are always conducive to feelings of intimacy.

But intimacy here is of two different kinds, both visible in the picture. The first, as we have seen, is to be found in the street-scenes and in the sights familiar to any town-dweller. The second relates to Rolin. The landscape is seen from the interior of the Chancellor's palace with its columns, its pavement and its stained glasses. Rolin does not look at the Virgin. Neither does the Virgin look at him. She seems to avert her gaze out of respect for Jesus and for Jesus only. Rolin's attitude is not one of humility. He is presented here as the embodiment of the ruler, the man who has in mind the affairs of a large kingdom extending as far as the Alps visible in the distance. He seems respectful, but lost in his thoughts, and it may well be that the landscape stands as an image of his mind. His thoughts are bent on the dukes' vast possessions, and while he is calling upon the Virgin to inspire his decisions, he keeps his mind's eye on the territories for which he is accountable.

This, it will be remembered, was the theme of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Good Government* frescoes which also presented the landscape, both urban and rural, as the setting in which a community took its bearings, whether public or personal, political or intimate. We have now come full circle to the emergence of the landscape in its earliest phase, and we may perhaps conclude by assessing the importance of the changes which took place in the period we have chosen. They can be summed up in two sentences. The technical innovations introduced by van Eyck were decisive: oil painting on wood and on canvas made the landscape a subject fit for a picture in the modern sense of the term. Having reached the point where it could interest a large public by offering a representation of mental life and of large horizons, the landscape could not fail to establish itself as a new genre in European painting. And it did.

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- FIG. 36 — Ambrogio Lorenzetti. *Good Government*, 1348. Detail: *The City of Siena*, Palazzo Pubblico, Council Chamber, East wall. Museo civico, Siena. Photo R. Testi.
- FIG. 37 — Jan van Eyck. *The Baptism of Christ*, *The Turin Book of Hours*. Fol. 94 recto, bas-de-page, ca. 1420. Fondazione Torino Musei.
- FIG. 38 — Jan van Eyck. *Altarpiece of the Holy Lamb*. 1432. Oil on panel, 375 x 520 cm. St Bavo, Ghent, (opened) *Adoration of the Holy Lamb*. Lower register, central panel. Lukas image bank, Ghent.
- FIG. 39 — Jan Van Eyck. *Altarpiece of the Holy Lamb*. 1432. Oil on panel, 375 x 520 cm. St. Bavo, Ghent, (closed) Back panels, top register, 2<sup>nd</sup> from left (view of a street from the inside of a house) and 3<sup>rd</sup> from left (view of a room with a wash basin and towel). Lukas image bank, Ghent.
- FIG. 40 — Jan van Eyck. *The Virgin and child with Chancellor Rolin*, ca. 1435. Oil on panel, 66 x 62 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- FIG. 41 — Jan van Eyck. *The Virgin and child with Chancellor Rolin*, ca. 1435. detail.

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