

Landscape into Art

K. Clark

August 23-24, 2015

I first encountered Kenneth Clark around 1970 as he was hosting a series called Civilization on TV. At the end of the decade I borrowed his book on the Nude and was mesmerized by the language he employed. The book under consideration does not provide the same sparkle, maybe because I am more sophisticated now¹, and constitutes a number of lectures given at Oxford as part of a course on art appreciation during his first year as a Slade professor. The ambition is not to provide an exhaustive historical documentary, but to give a sense of how art has developed by focusing on landscapes.

The art of landscapes is the art of imitation of the natural world which is not man-made. As such it has roots in antiquity, although very little remains of that, so the natural point of departure is in the Middle Ages. Personally I have always been intrigued in the miniature landscapes you can see depicted far away on portraits, especially of the ubiquitous Madonna, of which he has nothing to say. The early landscapes are rather schematic more dependent on symbolism than real observation of nature, and they make a rather stiff and primitive impression on us, who have been regularly exposed to more accomplished attempts. This is not to say that they are devoid of charm, on the contrary, their very ineptness give them in my mind an authenticity they might otherwise have lacked. We are made present at the birth of painting when everything is still child-like and fresh, like a dewy spring day, which many of them purport to depict. As typical representatives he brings out the calendar work (showing the seasonal variation of the year from month to month) of the Limbourg brothers. Their lack of proper perspective, and stiff figures, pasted on the flat canvas rather than put into the space they are intended to present, aid us in our imaginary transportation to the distant past which is almost indistinguishable from a timeless fairy-tale. Of course later the Medieval painters would learn proper perspective (an invention I suspect was made repeatedly in the history of painting, and no doubt known to the Greek) making for greater realism. The names that are brought up are Brunelleschi and Dürer. Clark makes some inchoate comments to the effect that perspectives might be mathematically correct but wrong nevertheless, without making more precise the latter claim. In addition to the Italian painters of the South, the Flemish painters of the North, such as various van Eycks and van der Goes, take pride of place at the time. Especially Jan van Eyck shows himself already to be quite accomplished. Clark himself has a penchant for Bellini, which I cannot share, waxing about his compositions. Then once again Flemish painters such as the Breughels and Bosch come to the fore as the foremost representatives. But landscapes did not come to the fore until the Dutch tradition of Ruisdael and others, and already by then the accomplishments were on a technical level not to be surpassed in my opinion.

¹ I also recall an article he wrote for NY on Beardsley, and I was likewise impressed by his sophistication, as I was with all the other articles, which no longer is the case

Now a landscape is not just a mindless depiction of a scene in front of you. Some simple-minded painters seem to have thought so, painstakingly painting everything in front of them, without realizing that the point of a landscape painting is to present a whole that fits together. And what makes a landscape painting of one piece? It is the light. It is the light that collects everything together and infuses the picture with a mood and a meaning, and it is the purpose of the artist to recognize this mood, to catch it, and to try and put it onto the canvas, which is a formidable technical challenge. The Dutch tradition was one of realism, while previous there had been some bizarre expeditions into fantasy land, remarkably by Grünewald in his Issenheim Altar, and maybe the strangest of them all - Hieronymus Bosch². Another artist he brings up as a Northerner is Altdorfer, whose Knight George is almost engulfed by the huge luxuriant trees the artist paints with such abandon. Nature was not a garden, but wild and untamed. As other examples of fantastic landscapes he brings up a host of Italians, who, with the obvious exception of da Vinci, do not impress. In addition to those he finds fit to put Rubens in the category. Then of course, the exceptional case of El Greco cannot be ignored.

In a chapter called Ideal Landscapes, he concentrates at first on Giorgioni, whose 'Tempest' from the Venetian Academy I recall well from a visit in my youth, then on Titian, whom one does not primarily associate with landscapes. The main characters are Claude Lorraine and Poussin. The former depict a kind of idealized landscape, which may have a definite mood, but does not appeal to me, as it points too much towards the insipid art of the 18th century. Poussin is lauded for his compositional elements and may hence be seen as a forerunner of Cezanne. I find his 'Summer' rather inept in its depiction of the reapers. The mood is too arcadic for my taste, and my reservations visavi his paintings are the same as those concerning Lorraine. Still I admit, the fact that all the reproductions are in black and white, makes it hard to fully savor them. As to my favorite Caspar David Friedrich he is only mentioned in passing, yet with due acknowledgment of how his landscapes are capable of powerfully conveying precise human moods.

As to the natural vision, namely artists who take the observation of nature very seriously and are committed to the task of conveying them through a resistant medium, Constable is given prominence. The oil-sketches of Constable are very modern in execution, and some of his finished paintings, such as 'Cottage in a Cornfield' are unabashedly idyllic pandering to sentimental tastes, yet of course making quite an impression on me, as our visual taste is only partially under our control. In Constable's worship of simple nature, he is coupled with the poet Wordsworth, another aficionado of the simple English landscape. Corot is the French Constable, who pursued during a long life his single-minded vision. Some of the earlier ones are very charming, as he grew older, he acquired a fixed style on the verge of degenerating into mere mannerism I would say. Courbet is also allowed to enter the stage, and gets a star for his Cliffs at Etretat, a tourist spot ever since. Pissaro, much to my surprise, is heralded for his compositions (which surprises me a lot) and as one of the pioneers of Impressionism, the first real break with the tradition of landscape painting, although adhering to the traditional ideals of creating realistic illusions, be it by other means. He takes Monet to task for his Cathedral paintings, which are wholly improper, the solid facades of a cathedral do not melt like ice-cream, as Clark puts it.

² Whose paintings gave me the creeps when I first encountered them in 1967

Fortunately Monet came to his senses when he started to paint water-lilies. Renoir I have never liked, and Clark connects him with Watteau and Fragonard, two insipid 18th century artists, whose works the author spares us. In fact he brings nothing from the 18th century, except Canaletto (whose crisp realism does not appeal to the author, who instead prefers the softer Guardi). The French are contrasted with Turner, in the opinion of Clark, the greatest of the British painters, whose later daring was possible due to wealthy and eccentric patrons, and the established reputation he had achieved during his early career. One striking painting of Turner is the locomotive in full speed. It was supposedly painted from nature, the story goes, as Clark recounts tongue in cheek, how a young woman observed once during a rainstorm how a man opened the window of a train and stuck his head out and kept it there for ten minutes, than his head and hair thoroughly drenched, he repaired to the compartment, shining with satisfaction. The young lady was intrigued, did the same, and when she later encountered the painting, she could testify to skeptical spectators, that it has indeed been painted from nature. Turner was an intellectual, documenting his work, and engaging in Goethe's theory of colors. He also had ambitions of being a writer, in fact a poet, but his verbal articulation was not up to par. Clark sees him as a Northern giant carrying on the tradition of Altendorf, while being a quintessential romantic. The impressionists had their day, their mode of happy sunshine could not be sustained indefinitely, as an artist grows older a certain despondency is bound to enter into his art as he realizes that life is about to end. As to van Gogh the anguish is obvious, and the general public cannot avoid reacting to it, but such art makes for awful imitations, and besides it is clear that van Gogh was mad.

Seurat is an art historians favorite, Clark remarks with some irony, if he had not existed historians surely would have invented him. So snugly does he fit into his hole. By concentrating on him many theoretical threads can be tied together. With Seurat order was brought into painting again, and Seurat did really plan his paintings very carefully before execution. His invention of pointillism, for which he is mostly known, was, according to Clark a mistake. It did not work as it ought to have, colors became muted and pale, almost like water-colors from a distance,

Finally he spends a lot of time on the modest Cezanne, who at one point tried to be an impressionist, humbly copying the works of Pissarro, before he came into his own. Clark explains how his paintings are made up of planes, whose location, depth and interaction with each other are conveyed through coloring from a restricted palette. As he painted the same subjects over and over again, there were an inevitable simplification and abstraction, yet he managed to convey a realism which often surpassed those of the impressionists. The debt the cubists owe to him is obvious.

Clark is no fan of abstract art per se. and in his epilogue he discusses how art can be saved from itself. That an age dominated by nuclear threats and materialism as manifested by science and bureaucracy, the spirit of man will nevertheless find a way of asserting itself, but unclear in what forms.

August 25, 2015

"The Landscape of Symbols" deals with the Middle Ages and an art where the natural world stood for religious ideas, rather than as a thing of beauty in itself. "The Landscape of Fact" shows the shift to the loving detail of the Van Eycks, Brueghel, and Giovanni Bellini, all the way through to Ruisdael and Vermeer. It was van Gogh who brought back the sense of tragedy into modern art; and, like Nietzsche and Ruskin, found in madness the only escape from the materialism of the nineteenth century.