The Virginia Landscape
by James C. Kelly & William M. S. Rasmussen

Landscapes were frequently sketched in Virginia during the colonial era, when there was less interest in the beauties of the land than in its bounties. Soon after independence, however, the land was seen to have intrinsic beauty, and the identity and reputation of Virginia came to reside in her natural and historic landmarks. Later, man's arrangements were seen to triumph over nature and were called progress. Today, there is a rediscovery of nature and for the first time there is a resident school of landscape artists.

Throughout the nineteenth century far fewer landscapists were active in Virginia than along the Hudson River. Almost none, in fact, were resident in the state until after the Civil War. One reason was the difficulty of travel in the region until mid-century, when the western counties finally were opened to general traffic, primarily via the railroad. Poor accessibility, however, did little to deter travelers, who made their way throughout the commonwealth, beginning even before the Revolution. If the nineteenth-century paintings of the Virginia landscape do not equal in number those of the northeast, the numerous accounts of these travelers match them in measuring interest in the land.

More crucial to the failure to establish a nineteenth-century school of landscapists in Virginia was the absence there of an urban center that would furnish patronage. Most Virginians lived on the land, which they could view firsthand through their windows. There was little reason to hang landscapes of this same scenery on their walls. Also, despite the example of George Washington to the contrary, antebellum Virginians tended to be content with the present and proud of the past, little inclined to look forward to a Manifest Destiny that could be made visible in landscape art. Their conceptions of nature, however, did find expression on canvas, mostly via the hands of northern and European artists who were visitors passing through the region, beginning well before a New York school of painting was established.

The importance of Virginia's exceptionally rich historical landscape was recognized at an early date. Even in 1789, when George Washington first took the oath as president, every schoolboy knew that the first permanent English settlement had been at Jamestown, that Mount Vernon also was in Virginia, and that the Revolutionary War had ended at Yorktown. In 1789 Virginia also was becoming known for its remarkable natural landscape. When a network of roads in the commonwealth connected the natural wonders, a southern version of the European Grand Tour emerged, with travelers going from place to place because "Western Virginia offered natural attractions in a condensed locale."[1] Throughout the nineteenth century it was these natural landmarks that attracted the most attention.

The most renowned "natural curiosity" -- to use the language of the day -- was Natural Bridge. In 1774 Thomas Jefferson purchased this landmark from George III so that it would remain accessible to the public. When David Johnson visited in the late 1850s, the artist departed from his usual depiction of bucolic scenery in order to suggest the sublimity of this subject.

Johnson presents Natural Bridge as comparable in grandeur to Niagara Falls, which had been painted by Frederic Church only three years earlier in a painting that had been almost universally admired. The two landmarks were often pared and compared; they were the only two in America routinely accepted at the time as truly sublime. The renown of Natural Bridge at mid-century is proven by Herman Melville's use of it to describe the great whale Moby-Dick: "But soon the fore part of him slowly rose from the water; for an instant his whole marbleized body formed a high arch, like Virginia's Natural Bridge, and warningly waving his banded flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself, sounded, and went out of sight."[2]

Harpers Ferry was a second natural landmark that was given international renown by Thomas Jefferson. As at Natural Bridge, he approached the land with thoughts of the Sublime. Jefferson imagined that the Potomac and Shenandoah
rivers must "have at length broken over at this spot, and have torn the mountain down from its summit to its base." He called the confluence of the rivers "one of the most stupendous scenes in nature" and claimed it was "worth a voyage across the Atlantic."[4] A number of the travelers who were lured to the site by that description agreed, although just as many did not. In a similar way, artists were divided as to how to appreciate this scenery. Some suggested its sublimity by picturing the view that Jefferson described; others focused instead on the bucolic landscape at the base of the mountains, painting it as a picturesque landscape. Harpers Ferry also was a transportation nexus, the gateway that linked the Ohio Valley to the city of Washington.

In the 1830s George Harvey pictured the traffic there, which included most of the means then known -- foot, horseback, canal boat, and railway. In 1859 the Harpers Ferry landscape won renown for yet another reason when abolitionist John Brown made a raid on the federal armory to secure weapons for slaves whom he assumed would revolt once they were armed. In a sense, the Civil War was ignited at Harpers Ferry, as much as at Fort Sumter. In the ensuing war the town changed hands several times and the land was marred. Afterwards, landscapists there tended to picture both the natural beauty of the site and evidence of its recent history.

With the railroad already at Harpers Ferry in the 1830s, it was inevitable that improved transportation soon would bring increased visitation. Travelers identified both "sublime and picturesque scenery" in these western counties of Virginia. Those European ideals, however, were not of primary interest to Worthington Whittredge, who in New York City had learned the philosophy of the early Hudson River School of painters. Whittredge found in the unspoiled landscape west of the Valley the kind of scenery that could inspire thoughts of nationalism and Manifest Destiny. In his depiction of Crow's Nest, near the New River gorge (now in West Virginia), the viewer is placed low in a wild and bountiful landscape through which he senses that man can easily progress. Not far beyond are mountains that tower toward heaven. A storm-blasted tree is evidence that this "Edenic" landscape is still the domain only of explorers and hunters.

Antebellum travel accounts suggest that the appeal of the Peaks of Otter, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains near where the James River crosses, lay in their "exceedingly imposing" appearance, the precarious situation at the summit, and the sublime view from that elevation. It was as much the view from the Peaks of Otter as the view of them that ranked this landmark as a major natural wonder. Edward Beyer pictured the view of the Peaks and the town of Liberty (now called Bedford) with extraordinary detail; his canvas was commissioned by the citizens of who felt pride of place.

Of the historic landmarks in Virginia, George Washington's Mount Vernon deserves to be the first in any discussion, because it is so well known and because it was by far the most visited site throughout the 1800s, and until well into the 1900s had no rival. Even today, this countryseat attracts roughly equal visitation to the whole complex at Colonial Williamsburg. The reasons are the preeminence of Washington as an historical figure, the site's proximity to the nation's capital, and the intrinsic charm of the architecture and beauty of the setting.

After the Virginia capital was moved from Jamestown in 1699, the setting there was quickly forgotten. A hundred years later, however, the history of that landscape was revived. James Kirke Paulding wrote in 1816, "Nothing now remains but the land they cultivated, and their graves; but the spot is well known, and every century...will only render it more interesting and illustrious."[4] In the following decades the island attracted painters who recorded the landscape, as well as a new generation of agricultural writers who revered the entire James River valley as the place of origin of Anglo-American farming.

Yorktown experienced a similar, if shorter, period of abandonment. When B. Henry Latrobe visited in 1798 he noted that the town was "half deserted. Trade has almost entirely left this once flourishing place, and none of the ravages of the war have been repaired."[5] Less than two decades later, however, Paulding sensed a new appreciation of the site: Yorktown "will ever be an object of peculiar interest, as the scene where the progress of European arms terminated," he wrote [6]. The picturesque river landscape there caught Latrobe's eye and the attention of a number of travelers.

Nearby, the scenery at Williamsburg also became picturesque and travelers and artists. In the twentieth century, as the tourist attraction known as Colonial Williamsburg, this landscape became even better known. One artist who helped to identify the character of Williamsburg was Charles Sheeler, who in the 1930s was invited there to picture it; his straightforward, linear method of painting seemed appropriate for a setting that had been remade as an early American site. When Sheeler depicted only a portion of Bassett Hall, the artist was able to suggest a distinct type of architecture that became so appreciated in twentieth-century America that it came to be known simply as the Colonial Williamsburg style.

By the time landscape painting reached Virginia in the mid-eighteenth century, the colony's tobacco economy had determined that the region was overwhelmingly rural. The idyllic nature of that settlement was suggested by William MacLeod, a Washington painter, in an unusually picturesque view near Mount Vernon that he painted on the eve of the Civil War. Scenery of this type began to disappear in the following decades. The transforming events for the northern
Virginia landscape would be later: the New Deal and especially World War II. As the federal government mushroomed, government offices spilled over from crowded Washington to the land across the Potomac.

From the time of the first settlement, Virginians achieved an intimacy with nature as hunters and fishermen. For the gentry these activities became sport. Throughout the colonial and antebellum eras and into the twentieth century, its members routinely engaged in one type or another, in contrast to their urban counterparts in the North. During the late colonial period hunting with horses and hounds became increasingly popular with the gentry, and it remains so today. John J. Porter, a Virginia artist whose engaging style of painting hounds in chase was influenced by English sporting prints, pictured fox hunting in the Piedmont in Culpeper County just before the Civil War.

Virginia was wealthy from tobacco. The profits from that crop enabled the gentry to build imposing countryseats. Thomas Jefferson anticipated that market towns would be developed to serve those plantations. The towns were to be small and close to nature, and thereby free of the evils of large urban centers. Beyer painted a number of the countryseats and Jeffersonian market towns that he visited in western Virginia in the 1850s. His view of the plantation of Colonel William Lewis depicts a slave force at work in the foreground. The artist offers no criticism; instead he portrays Bellevue as idyllic. Lewis' agricultural operation seems prosperous, man is in harmony with nature, the scene is sheltered by distant mountains, and a tiny train alludes to progress without significantly compromising the environment.

Beyer's view of nearby Salem, the market town that served Bellevue, was commissioned by a group of its residents and neighbors, including William Lewis, as a way to celebrate civic pride. The artist also painted the nearby town of Buchanan, which was invigorated when the James River and Kanawha Canal was extended to it in 1851. The docks and warehouses were used to unload and store the goods transported on the canal in the prospering town. To the eyes of most Virginians, however, the sight of Buchanan at mid-century was less a reminder of Jeffersonian ideals regarding settlement than evidence of progress in transportation, which steadily was linking the various counties of the commonwealth.

Paradoxically, the improvements in transportation brought about an interest in the wilderness into which man was intruding. Railroads and canals made the remote landscapes of the western counties reachable, as well as vulnerable to development. It might be argued that the Virginia wilderness was not appreciated by artists until its loss became thinkable. William Louis Sonntag produced the grandest views of this scenery. In both the Blue Ridge mountains and the Alleghenies he applied the Hudson River School formula, by which the rugged, unspoiled features of a landscape were emphasized in order to convey nationalistic overtones. Sonntag saw the development, and consequent loss, of wilderness as positive, the fulfillment of a national destiny to evolve into a great nation. He was one of several northern artists at mid-century who reversed Thomas Cole's pessimistic vision of American destiny, rewriting it with a better ending. Because Virginia had remained an overwhelmingly rural society, Cole's fears about too rapid progress had rarely surfaced in the Old Dominion.

Antebellum Virginians increasingly welcomed progress, which many measured not only by their building of canals and railroads but also by urban growth. If Thomas Jefferson envisioned a landscape of countryseats and market towns, he also spurred the development of Richmond when he embellished it with a capitol that was the first classical "temple of liberty" in America. It is visible in Lefevre Cranstone's view of the city that was painted in what was a decade of prosperity that preceded the Civil War. Cranstone, whose travels carried him as far as Australia, had been schooled in the watercolor tradition of his native England. He was but one in a long succession of artists in Virginia to paint city views in a style that is linear and attentive to crisp illumination that allows clarity of vision.

Only two years after Cranstone's visit to Richmond, the city's industrial strength lured the capital of the Confederacy from Montgomery, Alabama. At the close of the Civil War a portion of the landscape that is shown to the left in Cranstone's view would be destroyed. In the intervening years the splendor of Virginia's rural landscape made the episodes of the war that unfolded on it seem all the more tragic. Albert Bierstadt painted in northern Virginia a beautiful view, wherein he hints at the irony that what then was called God's "Holy Book" of nature had become the stage for fratricide. Beneath magnificent trees the human figures at war seem insignificant, their purposes fleeting. The philosophies of nature worship and Manifest Destiny were shaken by the crisis of the Civil War, causing luminaries like Bierstadt, Sanford Gifford, and Walt Whitman to travel to the front to investigate.

As early as 1830, at the close of the commonwealth's golden age of political hegemony, Virginians had begun to look backwards. Defeat in the Civil War gave them further reason to be nostalgic, as they fabricated a "Lost Cause." Increasingly the commonwealth became known as "the Old Dominion," or "Old Virginia," both connoting nostalgia for an earlier period that was undeniably significant for its history. This elusive past, seemingly visible in the Virginia landscape, attracted the attention of several visiting artists of the post-Civil War period. They looked for evidence of a lifestyle that suddenly appealed because it was gone. George Inness was the leading landscapist in America when he traveled to the
region in 1884. His views painted in Goochland County, just west of Richmond, seem to transcend time, carrying the viewer from the present to the past.

The land actually was little changed by the war, as Walt Whitman had anticipated. Its “capacity” for “products” and “nourishment” endured, allowing life to continue after Appomattox with some normalcy. Thomas Nelson Page explained at the time that because the land survived, “the old life went on for awhile almost as before, like a wheel that continues to turn with its own propulsion even after the motive power is removed.” The “nourishment” offered was not only physical but spiritual as well. The land inspired paintings, prints, and photographs of it that served as images of stability and renewal. The landscape of the Shenandoah Valley in particular attracted artists. One of the latest to work in such a vein was Alexis Fournier, a Minnesota painter who in 1893 had traveled to Paris for training. In the 1920s, on site in the Valley, probably in Rockingham County or further north, he adapted French Impressionism to an idyllic setting. He shows that nature is always renewing itself, and in turn the spirit of those who depend upon the land for their well being.

The same theme was repeated a quarter century later by another visitor to the commonwealth, Rockwell Kent. In the 1950s, the artist found an unspoiled portion of the Virginia landscape at a large estate south of Charlottesville. Here was pristine nature, much closer at hand than Kent’s better known haunts such as Greenland and the tip of South America. Oak Ridge, a twentieth-century country seat encompassing hundreds of acres, belonged to Joseph James Ryan, a patron who often flew the painter to Nelson County for extended visits and gave him free run of the grounds.

In these same years a local artist applied an equally vibrant palette to the landscape of the Piedmont. Theresa Pollak studied with the abstract expressionist and master colorist Hans Hofmann in Provincetown in 1958. There she learned new skills as a colorist that at the age of nearly sixty she put to innovative use in paintings of distinctly Virginia subjects. Pollak’s depiction of Afton Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains replicates an actual view, while at the same time it functions with the energy of a Hoffman abstraction.

Since the colonial era the Virginia landscape has been sketched by visiting artists. A recent traveler to the state was Wayne Thiebaud, recognized as a major West Coast realist since the 1960s, when his lively canvases of cakes and pastries carried the still life tradition into the domain of Pop Art. Thiebaud’s light and bright views of San Francisco and of the floodplain of the Sacramento River Delta start with visual fact and then turn reality into art. In 1981 he adapted that very personal style to the green Virginia scenery west of the Piedmont. Thiebaud visited the resort of Mountain Lake as a participant in one of a number of workshops organized there by Virginia Tech. Those programs are but one of many indications today that the region currently enjoys a revived interest in the land and in landscape painting.

4 [James Kirke Paulding], Letters from the South Written During an Excursion in the Summer of 1816 (New York: James Eastburn & Co., 1817), vol. 1, pgs. 95 - 96.
6 [Paulding], Letters from the South, vol. 1, pgs. 59 - 60.

About the authors

James C. Kelly, Ph.D., is director of museums at the Virginia Historical Society. Among his recent publications are Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement (with David Hackett Fischer), The Virginia Landscape: A Cultural History (with William M. S. Ramussen), and The Story of Virginia.

William Rasmussen is the Lora M. Robins Curator at the Virginia Historical Society. He has written several articles on a variety of American painting subjects and on colonial architecture. His is co-author of The Making of Virginia Architecture, an exhibition catalogue that won the Society of Architectural Historians’ Architectural Exhibition Catalogue Award in 1992, among other honors, and Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend (1994). He is a graduate of Washington and Lee University.
with a doctorate from the University of Delaware

Resource Library editor's note

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This article pertains to an exhibition, The Virginia Landscape: A Cultural History, which was on display at the Virginia Historical Society July 13 - November 12, 2000. A portion of the exhibition traveled to the Art Museum of Western Virginia, where it was on view March 1 - May 28, 2001, and The Virginia Landscape is now an online exhibition that may be viewed here. The exhibition was accompanied by a 224-page color catalogue published by Howell Press, Charlottesville, Virginia. This article also appeared in the July - August 2000 issue of American Art Review.

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