The Tessin Lecture: Inventing the Landscape. 
The Origin of Plein-Air Painting in Italy in the Early 19th Century

Anna Ottani Cavina
Professor Emerita of Art History, University of Bologna

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 26:2
You do not see artists painting landscapes out in the countryside any more: folding stool, drawing portfolio case, wide-brimmed hat and strange parasols to beat the glare of the summer sun. We remember them with some regret, as they made intense studies of the Tivoli waterfalls, the green of the woods on the hills of Rome, the milky blanket of fog further north.

These days, you do not meet such painters any more, stopping to study a skyful of clouds, water reflections on plains, green grass and green hills. Considering the countryside, with its apparent and transitory beauty, is an activity to which time is no longer devoted, or at least not in the way painters used to feel challenged to decipher and describe what they saw when they left their studios to paint outdoors.

As early as the 17th century there were artists equipped to do their oil painting en plein air. François Desportes (1661–1743), in Louis XIV's France, would go to the parks around the royal castles taking with him his special léger bagage consisting of his palette, a few paintbrushes and small metal boxes with prepared pigments. He would plant the steel point of his cane into the ground. Then he would fix an iron easel on to the cane with plenty of sheets of paper for painting, attaching them at the top with a small nail. Desportes, in the 17th century, was an exception. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, however, artists leaving their studios to paint out in the countryside had become a shared

Fig. 1 Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847), Caspar David Friedrich in His Studio, 1811. Oil on canvas, 54 x 42 cm. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, HK-1285.

The Tessin Lecture: Inventing the Landscape. The Origin of Plein-Air Painting in Italy in the Early 19th Century

Anna Ottani Cavina
Professor Emerita of Art History, University of Bologna
d’après nature, seeking a point of fusion between vision and emotion, a representation of natural reality. Much better than my words, that emotion is captured by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), the great artist of the French Revolution. On arriving in Italy, David confessed: “The scales dropped from my eyes”. As if to say: “I am seeing with new eyes”. The encounter with Rome, Naples and the Italian countryside (“a magic land”, wrote Thomas

experience. This was especially the case in Italy because this breakthrough, this radical change that was the start of plein-air landscape painting, painting outdoors, this revolution in terms of avant-garde experiments in subject, composition and technique occurred when artists from the north (German, English, Scandinavian) met the light, geometry and colours of the Italian landscape. So that landscape oil sketches, done on the spot, became a sought-after testing ground for talented artists from across Europe, who sought inspiration and innovative methods both in and around Rome.

For many artists descending from northern Europe, the Italian landscape could be said to have acted as a detonator, unleashing their creativity. In the wake of Schelling and Rousseau’s philosophical theories, artists left their studios and steeped themselves in nature, painting live

Fig. 2 Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Woman at a Window, 1822. Oil on canvas, 44.1 x 37 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, A I 918.

Fig. 3 Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (1751–1829), Goethe at the Window on Via del Corso, Rome, 1787. Watercolour, chalk and ink over pencil on paper, 415 x 266 mm. Goethe Museum, Frankfurt am Main.
Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) painted the great Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) in his monastic, austere studio, painting a landscape, without even looking out of the window, turning his back to the window, even! (Fig. 1)

At the very beginning, painters had two ways of opening up to nature: framing nature in a window, or taking a folding chair, paintbox and parasol against the Mediterranean sun and heading off along the woodland tracks. The change is radical in terms of perception and technique. Friedrich, for example, frames his young wife Caroline Bonner looking at the river Elbe. But, beyond the window, the landscape is not yet the main character; it is rather a landscape of the soul, a variation on the theme of melancholy (Fig. 2). A remarkably similar perspective can also be found in the portrait of Goethe who overlooks Via del Corso in Rome, drawn by Tischbein (1751–1829) (Fig. 3).

Things really change in an enchanting painting by Léon Cogniet (1794–1880), a French painter who had won the Prix de Rome and therefore had the privilege of living in Rome at Villa Medici. Cogniet is in his room – frock coat and slippers – the window suddenly opens out, on to the bright view of Rome (Fig. 4). It is already a portrait of a piece of nature, framed by the window. The artist is reading a letter from home. Apologising to his teacher, Pierre-Joseph Jones) was something astounding, a revelation. Some of them (like Jones himself) would never again reach such heights of innovation once they left Italy. In fact, on meeting the Italian landscape and light, the artists radically rethought the potential of landscape and how a painted landscape is never simply a mirror of what we see, but inevitably rather a landscape of ideas, an altered landscape.

**Framing Nature in a Window**

Leaving the studio and painting in nature was not at all in the tradition of the landscape painter. From Poussin to Friedrich, they used to paint huge canvases slowly, indoors, inside their studio. Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) painted the great Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) in his monastic, austere studio, painting a landscape, without even looking out of the window, turning his back to the window, even! (Fig. 1)

At the very beginning, painters had two ways of opening up to nature: framing nature in a window, or taking a folding chair, paintbox and parasol against the Mediterranean sun and heading off along the woodland tracks. The change is radical in terms of perception and technique. Friedrich, for example, frames his young wife Caroline Bonner looking at the river Elbe. But, beyond the window, the landscape is not yet the main character; it is rather a landscape of the soul, a variation on the theme of melancholy (Fig. 2). A remarkably similar perspective can also be found in the portrait of Goethe who overlooks Via del Corso in Rome, drawn by Tischbein (1751–1829) (Fig. 3).

Things really change in an enchanting painting by Léon Cogniet (1794–1880), a French painter who had won the Prix de Rome and therefore had the privilege of living in Rome at Villa Medici. Cogniet is in his room – frock coat and slippers – the window suddenly opens out, on to the bright view of Rome (Fig. 4). It is already a portrait of a piece of nature, framed by the window. The artist is reading a letter from home. Apologising to his teacher, Pierre-Joseph Jones) was something astounding, a revelation. Some of them (like Jones himself) would never again reach such heights of innovation once they left Italy. In fact, on meeting the Italian landscape and light, the artists radically rethought the potential of landscape and how a painted landscape is never simply a mirror of what we see, but inevitably rather a landscape of ideas, an altered landscape.

**Framing Nature in a Window**

Leaving the studio and painting in nature was not at all in the tradition of the landscape painter. From Poussin to Friedrich, they used to paint huge canvases slowly, indoors, inside their studio. Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847) painted the great Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) in his monastic, austere studio, painting a landscape, without even looking out of the window, turning his back to the window, even! (Fig. 1)

At the very beginning, painters had two ways of opening up to nature: framing nature in a window, or taking a folding chair, paintbox and parasol against the Mediterranean sun and heading off along the woodland tracks. The change is radical in terms of perception and technique. Friedrich, for example, frames his young wife Caroline Bonner looking at the river Elbe. But, beyond the window, the landscape is not yet the main character; it is rather a landscape of the soul, a variation on the theme of melancholy (Fig. 2). A remarkably similar perspective can also be found in the portrait of Goethe who overlooks Via del Corso in Rome, drawn by Tischbein (1751–1829) (Fig. 3).

Things really change in an enchanting painting by Léon Cogniet (1794–1880), a French painter who had won the Prix de Rome and therefore had the privilege of living in Rome at Villa Medici. Cogniet is in his room – frock coat and slippers – the window suddenly opens out, on to the bright view of Rome (Fig. 4). It is already a portrait of a piece of nature, framed by the window. The artist is reading a letter from home. Apologising to his teacher, Pierre-Joseph Jones) was something astounding, a revelation. Some of them (like Jones himself) would never again reach such heights of innovation once they left Italy. In fact, on meeting the Italian landscape and light, the artists radically rethought the potential of landscape and how a painted landscape is never simply a mirror of what we see, but inevitably rather a landscape of ideas, an altered landscape.
Narcisse Guérin (1774–1833), who was in Paris, Cogniet confessed that, despite himself, something had happened to him. “You ask me what strikes me most about Rome, the ancient sculptures, the paintings of the masters, the people [...] I would say the beauties of nature...”2. For a painter who had absorbed David’s preference for historical subjects, such an intimate rapport with nature was a surprising and totally new thing.

Painting Outdoors
At the end of the 18th century, painting outdoors was not at all an obvious, current practice. A charming painting by Hubert Robert (1733–1808) clearly proves that the artists, sitting and painting, with their portfolio case on their knees, in front of the Tivoli waterfalls, were a bizarre, new presence (Fig. 5). This is clear from the street urchins, to the right, looking at them with great curiosity.

Again, still in front of the Tivoli waterfalls, Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782) has painted a picture that could be autobiographical: two painters quickly collecting their canvases and easels as a storm arrives. The painting is dated 1752 (National Gallery, London). As early as that date there was someone painting en plein air.

Finally, the Tivoli falls in a silent, magnificent painting by Johann Martin von Rohden (1778–1868) (Fig. 6). Pure landscape, no narrative, no religious or mythological pretext. Just a celebration of nature, intact, harmonious and beautiful: the Italian landscape. This is the real topic, at a time when the landscape goes from being a background feature to become the principal subject.

Despite its political and economic decadence, Italy was still the place where modern art was staged, but the protagonists were no longer Italian. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his book Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert, only non-native people know how to capture the wonder of the ruins, the sublimity of the Vesuvius or of the Alps, the charm of the Roman countryside. The natives have those wonders in front of their eyes every day. They are used to it.

Portraits of Skies
The sky is one of the great themes that fascinates the artist who paints outdoors. And it is precisely the mobility of the sky, the continuous and very rapid changes: clouds, storms, sunsets, colours... to modify profoundly the technique “pour saisir la nature sur le fait”, for capturing the fugitive moment, as Valenciennes wrote in his treatise, “Do you have to paint a sunset? You have to do it in no more than half an hour.”3. So painters work extremely fast. It is the legitimation, or rather the triumph, of the unfinished, the triumph of new work processes.

The technique changes and the support changes too. No longer the canvas, no more oil on canvas that dries too slowly. But oil on paper or watercolour that is liquid, fugitive and maintains the effect of the sketch. Consequently, the new language is abbreviated, essentially expressing colour, and the perception of reality can no longer fade into the defined characteristics of the landscape. Because painting from real life en plein air meant discovering the thousand variations in the
Smoke of London (Fig. 9) Ruskin exhibited a prescient and modern environmentalist awareness in setting the polluting smoke from early British industry in the frameless space of the sky to make it appear phantasmagorical and menacing.

The Roman Countryside
Among the many topics much loved by plein air painters, I would quickly like to focus on some exemplary sites: the Roman countryside, Venice, Naples and the sublime, anticlassical beauty of the mountains. What kind of Rome did they paint, what kind of city did they depict in their paintings?

On the subject of skies, in the limited space I have available on this occasion, I have chosen a few memorable “portraits of skies”. The first is Simon Denis (1755–1813) and the recent purchase of the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 7). Denis was born in Antwerp. He came to Paris in 1775, then to Rome and Naples in Italy, where he would have a prestigious career, becoming painter to the king. This painting belongs to his Roman period during which, after Valenciennes but before Granet, Denis painted sketches like this. Often, on the back of the painting, he indicates the day and even the hour in which the sketch was executed. For example: “Tivoli, la nuit”, or “Il faut faire la nature en ravage”, which means: “We need to paint distraught, restless nature, nature upset!” Denis prefers a dramatic representation of the landscape, a theatrical, romantic representation. His particularly important role emerged in the 2001 exhibition that I curated at the Grand Palais in Paris (Paysages d’Italie). Along the same lines, the d’après nature studies by François-Marius Granet (1775–1849) – who came to Rome in 1802 – are based on a reality that is more atmospheric (non-topographical) and impressionistic rather than objective evidence. Taking this abbreviated way of painting to its extreme, Granet was introducing a liquidity that had hitherto been considered unthinkable so as to dissolve the prospective structure of the composition in a painting of light (Fig. 8).

To conclude this sequence of skies – or more precisely fragments of sky – I have chosen the extraordinary freedom of John Ruskin, who loved to paint “to the last touch, in the open air, from the thing itself”5. In Sunset at Herne Hill through the landscape’s way of shaping and reshaping itself, eventually undermining the idea of landscape governed by a rational order based on the constituent principles of a humanistic system. How awareness was arrived at was changing. And, again, this was happening in the Italian context, where the landscape was occupying spaces that had hitherto been controlled by history. And where artists who were not Italian – French, English, German, Scandinavian – were alerted by the Mediterranean light to the essence of this new relationship.

On the subject of skies, in the limited space I have available on this occasion, I have chosen a few memorable “portraits of skies”. The first is Simon Denis (1755–1813) and the recent purchase of the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 7). Denis was born in Antwerp. He came to Paris in 1775, then to Rome and Naples in Italy, where he would have a prestigious career, becoming painter to the king. This painting belongs to his Roman period during which, after Valenciennes but before Granet, Denis painted sketches like this. Often, on the back of the painting, he indicates the day and even the hour in which the sketch was executed. For example: “Tivoli, la nuit”, or “Il faut faire la nature en ravage”, which means: “We need to paint distraught, restless nature, nature upset!” Denis prefers a dramatic representation of the landscape, a theatrical, romantic representation. His particularly important role emerged in the 2001 exhibition that I curated at the Grand Palais in Paris (Paysages d’Italie). Along the same lines, the d’après nature studies by François-Marius Granet (1775–1849) – who came to Rome in 1802 – are based on a reality that is more atmospheric (non-topographical) and impressionistic rather than objective evidence. Taking this abbreviated way of painting to its extreme, Granet was introducing a liquidity that had hitherto been considered unthinkable so as to dissolve the prospective structure of the composition in a painting of light (Fig. 8).

To conclude this sequence of skies – or more precisely fragments of sky – I have chosen the extraordinary freedom of John Ruskin, who loved to paint “to the last touch, in the open air, from the thing itself”. In Sunset at Herne Hill through the sky’s way of shaping and reshaping itself, eventually undermining the idea of landscape governed by a rational order based on the constituent principles of a humanistic system. How awareness was arrived at was changing. And, again, this was happening in the Italian context, where the landscape was occupying spaces that had hitherto been controlled by history. And where artists who were not Italian – French, English, German, Scandinavian – were alerted by the Mediterranean light to the essence of this new relationship.

On the subject of skies, in the limited space I have available on this occasion, I have chosen a few memorable “portraits of skies”. The first is Simon Denis (1755–1813) and the recent purchase of the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 7). Denis was born in Antwerp. He came to Paris in 1775, then to Rome and Naples in Italy, where he would have a prestigious career, becoming painter to the king. This painting belongs to his Roman period during which, after Valenciennes but before Granet, Denis painted sketches like this. Often, on the back of the painting, he indicates the day and even the hour in which the sketch was executed. For example: “Tivoli, la nuit”, or “Il faut faire la nature en ravage”, which means: “We need to paint distraught, restless nature, nature upset!” Denis prefers a dramatic representation of the landscape, a theatrical, romantic representation. His particularly important role emerged in the 2001 exhibition that I curated at the Grand Palais in Paris (Paysages d’Italie). Along the same lines, the d’après nature studies by François-Marius Granet (1775–1849) – who came to Rome in 1802 – are based on a reality that is more atmospheric (non-topographical) and impressionistic rather than objective evidence. Taking this abbreviated way of painting to its extreme, Granet was introducing a liquidity that had hitherto been considered unthinkable so as to dissolve the prospective structure of the composition in a painting of light (Fig. 8).

To conclude this sequence of skies – or more precisely fragments of sky – I have chosen the extraordinary freedom of John Ruskin, who loved to paint “to the last touch, in the open air, from the thing itself”. In Sunset at Herne Hill through the sky’s way of shaping and reshaping itself, eventually undermining the idea of landscape governed by a rational order based on the constituent principles of a humanistic system. How awareness was arrived at was changing. And, again, this was happening in the Italian context, where the landscape was occupying spaces that had hitherto been controlled by history. And where artists who were not Italian – French, English, German, Scandinavian – were alerted by the Mediterranean light to the essence of this new relationship.
The repertoire has changed fundamentally. Here is the famous Villa Albani, reproduced without emphasis by Constantin Hansen (1804–1880). The monumental villa is almost invisible, pushed to the margins of a frame that exalts the geometry of the gardens (Fig. 10). The same happens to Villa Mattei, which lies behind us as our gaze is drawn from the grand terrace towards the hills of Rome on the horizon (Fig 11).

These artists invented a new Italian landscape that was full of charm, more suited to the new middle class and to the small size of our homes. A Rome to pack in, when you return home, an intimate idea of Rome to be kept in your heart.

Inventing the Italian Landscape: Venice
The perception of Venice also changes radically to appear to us from that point as a city between water and sky, vibrant, oriental. Fluid and unconventional compared to an Italy that was established and conventional.

When did this idea of an eroded, elusive and unfinished city, make an appearance that was so close to Georg Simmel’s description: “Venice rootlessly floating in the sea, like a plucked flower”?26

This idea of Venice, so natural to us as to seem obvious, emerged in the early 19th century. In literature, this icon of Romantic imagination was forged by Lord Byron; in art it was shaped by the work of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) on his first encounter with the city in 1819 (Fig. 12). Turner is 44 years old – he is an acknowledged painter. He captures the transparencies of Venice, its forms merged in space, the iridescences of the Ducal Palace. And delivers to us a city of water, sky, light and silence. Because that is what artists do. They have antennae that pick up the imminent future and, in forging an image of a city, in a way they shape its destiny.

Turner’s watercolours of Venice show it as ethereal and transcendental. An icon that had been forever hidden, suddenly ‘liberated’ by the paintbrush of an artist. A Venice that was blurred and ephemeral, in low resolution, as it were, ready to blend into the crystal-clear evanescence created by the Romantic painters. An emblem of beauty tarnished by time, an ideal place for every decadence, providing privileged access to Byzantium. Yet so magical and dazzling as to be favoured by the Impressionists and Monet, eventually becoming a cliché, reinforced by postcards.

That was not the perception at the time. Before Turner – with Canaletto being the quintessential proponent – it was the land side that was emphasised. Venice was seen by everyone as a tangible collection of buildings, a mass of tightly packed crystalline architecture, as depicted in the paintings of Antonio Canal (Canaletto) (1697–1768), the painter who, with the objectivity of a reporter, stressed the land aspect of this amphibian city, portraying a Venice that had people being active and present. A productive Venice, a “Vitale neptunische Stadt”, a glorious “republic of beavers”, as it appears to the young Goethe, who captures the synthesis of life and form before Turner reveals its
decadent, visionary beauty, dreamlike with its shades of periwinkle, opal and topaz that would later be associated with Ruskin, Klimt and Thomas Mann.

In other words, Turner introduces an interpretation of the city that is so perfect, absolute and never “seen” before, that it later became canonical. Because artists sometimes reveal the unseen so that a certain Italian landscape becomes visible because of the iconic transposition handed down to us by the painters.

Naples
Another of the memorable places that artists invariably visited was Naples, a city providing every possible prospect: an excessive, anticlassical, sublime kind of beauty with the volcano always active, in flames, as a great new romantic theme (Fig. 13).

Naples was also an encounter with antiquity, because of the discoveries and excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii, a sort of “resurrection”, in the mid-18th century, of the ancient cities buried in the year 79 after Christ.

Finally, Naples was also the city of luminous and geometrical constructions portrayed by Thomas Jones (1742–1803), who came from Wales, the most innovative and modern, but totally unsuccessful artist of the period. Jones produced his finest work during the years he spent in Naples, around 1782, living in rented rooms, depicting anonymous streets and houses in forgotten parts of the city. The subject is always an ordinary place, a non-place revisited with the clarity of other times. Thomas Jones relates his emotions while standing in front of a wall (Fig. 14). He exalts the secret beauty of a balcony in Naples, conceived as a fragment, which extends beyond the perimeter of the frame. But in order to bring to light the geometry of an ordinary house, to reveal the beauty that transcends a given view, Jones introduces a precise axis in the centre where the orthogonal lines meet. The poor balcony is built as an altarpiece and has the centrality of an Enthroned Madonna. A wall of volcanic stone with washing strung on a line forms both the visual fulcrum of the composition and the colour basis underpinning
the painting. White, blue, a slightly faded green: colour refractions from the wall, the sky and the foliage in the corner. The tiny window is one of the great microcosms of painting. Today it belongs to the National Gallery in London. But, in 1782, such a painting was incomprehensible. Jones could not find a patron anywhere; none of his paintings could be sold in Italy, and he brought all of them back to England. As he himself wrote in his unforgettable Memoirs\(^7\), he considered himself a painter “born out of due time”, confessing a keen awareness of man’s solitude. Thomas Jones, a genius. A genius born out of due time! So, it was painters who shaped our landscape, helping us to see it with new eyes.

This is what happened with the landscape of Provence, France, where a paradoxical road sign, a brown road sign, planted on the verge of the Highway l’Autoroute du Midi, describes it as “Paysages de Cézanne”, thus telling us that what made the landscape materialise was the vision of a great painter. Because the painted landscape reflects an awareness of the real world combined at the same time with an endless ability to create other worlds.

Notes:
1. “il portoit aux champs ses pinceaux et sa palette toute chargée, dans des boîtes de fer-blanc; il avoit une canne avec un bout d’acier long et pointu, pour la tenir ferme dans le terrain, et dans la pomme d’acier qui s’ouvroit, s’emboîtait à vis un petit châssis du même métal, auquel il attachoit le portefeuille et le papier. Il n’alloit point à la campagne, chez ses amis, sans porter ce léger bagage, avec lequel il ne s’ennuyoit point, et dont il ne manquoit pas de se servir utilement” (Claude-François Desportes, La vie de M. Desportes écrite par son fils, in Louis Dussieux, Mémoires inédits sur la vie et les ouvrages des membres de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Paris 1845, II, p. 109).