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**Lectio Praecursoria: In Search of Scientific and Artistic Landscape – Düsseldorf Landscape Painting and Reflections of the Natural Sciences as Seen in the Artworks of Finnish, Norwegian and German Artists**, an Introductory Lecture at the Public Examination of Anne-Maria Pennonen's Dissertation, University of Helsinki, 21 February 2020

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Landscape painting is a rather new phenomenon in Finland. Apart from a few examples from preceding centuries, it started to develop properly only in the course of the 19th century. In its early stage, landscape graphics and illustrated travelogues played an important role. Moreover, Düsseldorf had a great influence on how artists' interests – and later the public interest – were directed towards landscape painting.

In Finland and Sweden, the public gaze was focused on Düsseldorf as a result of the 'Nordic Art Exhibition', which took place at the Royal Academy in Stockholm in 1850. The exhibition presented works by artists who had studied or were working in Düsseldorf, and it was the landscapes by the Norwegian artists, Hans Gude and August Cappelen, that attracted the most attention. Inspired by the exhibition, Werner Holmberg became the

first prominent Finnish artist to travel to Düsseldorf to study landscape painting, in the summer of 1853. Victoria Åberg, Magnus von Wright and Fanny Churberg were among others who travelled to Düsseldorf following Holmberg's lead.

As for the role of the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, it was actually the work of individual artists and their activities outside



**Hjalmar Munsterhjelm, Brook**  
(a copy after Johann Wilhelm Schirmer's *Parthie an der Düsselmit Pestwurz*), undated,  
48.5cm x 55.5cm  
Gösta and Bertha Stenman  
Donation, Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Kirsi Halkola





Werner Holmberg,  
*Autumn Landscape near  
Düsseldorf, 1857,*  
watercolour,  
21.5cm x 20.5cm  
Antell Collections, Finnish  
National Gallery / Ateneum  
Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Tero Suvilammi



the *Kunstakademie* that built up the city's reputation in landscape painting. One of these was Johann Wilhelm Schirmer, who is regarded as the founder and pioneer of the landscape painting of the Düsseldorf School. At the beginning of his career, Schirmer was nominated to teach the landscape painting class in 1830, and later he continued as a professor. In Düsseldorf, Schirmer had a great impact on the activities outside the *Kunstakademie*, and he introduced a new approach to landscape, according to which it was essential to look at the landscape in a 'proper fashion', and expressions like 'the new naturalism' and 'the truth of nature' were widely used. As a part of Schirmer's teaching practice, it was essential to study landscape in the open air, and accordingly compose sketches and studies from nature – only from nature. Schirmer's ideas and teachings were conveyed to Finnish and Norwegian artists by the Norwegian artist Hans Gude.

Schirmer and his colleague Carl Friedrich Lessing undertook walking and painting trips along the River Rhine, as well as in Düsseldorf's immediate environs. Within a short distance of the city, there were several places with interesting sights, which also attracted other landscape painters. While walking outdoors, Schirmer and Lessing composed accurate studies not only of trees, plants, mountains, boulders and streams, but also of clouds, the sky and atmospheric phenomena. Along with pictures of single trees and close-ups of trees and other vegetation, the sensation of being under the trees became an essential part of the composition. For Lessing, a careful study of nature based on natural sciences was a prerequisite for art, and he was interested in geology in particular. Artists' experiences were not limited simply to seeing, but comprised other senses as well – hearing, feeling and

smelling in particular. In their choice of motifs contemplation played a crucial role, and such contemplating continued back in the studio.

Landscape painting as a specific genre of visual arts is considered to have been established particularly in the early 17th century in the Netherlands and Italy, but there are older traditions of pictorial representation of landscapes. Dutch landscape art was especially highly appreciated, both in Dresden and Düsseldorf. Landscape painting in Germany, Britain and France underwent a significant revival in the 19th century, which can be attributed to a new relationship with nature as a result of the Enlightenment and also to the development of the natural sciences. In the mid-19th century, there was also a remarkable expansion in the appreciation of landscape art due to social and economic factors – in the case of Düsseldorf, the wealthy bourgeoisie started to decorate their homes with landscapes.

Norway provides an interesting point of comparison for this study. The political situations in Finland and Norway, as well as the movement towards independence, show a number of similarities in the course of the 19th century. There are similarities in the development of artistic life in both countries. Generally speaking, we could say that Germany constituted a centre, whereas Finland and Norway were regarded as peripheries in the sense of science, as well as the arts. However, there were also centres and peripheries within these two countries.

In some respects, Norwegians in Düsseldorf can be regarded as intermediaries between the Germans and the Finns. In this role, they delivered and filtered new ideas and impulses that had originated in Germany or that they had encountered there. These ideas concerned, for instance, the approach to nature and landscape. If Finland and Norway represented peripheries in terms of artistic life and education, Denmark and Sweden – Copenhagen and Stockholm respectively – acted as centres, since they already had their own art academies at the beginning of the 19th century.

The relationship between Düsseldorf and the different Nordic countries varied. On the whole, the influence of Düsseldorf and its art academy was greater in Norway and Finland, whereas in Denmark and Sweden it had less impact as they had their own art academies and also because of the political situation in the 1860s and 1870s.

When looking at a landscape painting, we can ask whose view it is. We can also ask what part of the surroundings is included in the landscape, or which elements have been selected from it and which elements left aside. We can try to imagine the place where the painter was while composing the picture. Moreover, we tend to associate the inner spectator of the view with the painter and therefore assume that we are looking at the same view from the same place as the artist. We can say that landscape is something subjective, because we all see it in a different way. If we make a picture from the same point of view, there will be as many different representations as there are presenters. The meaning of looking has varied in different cultures and eras.

We also know that there is no such a thing as an innocent gaze. While looking at pictures and images, we project different meanings onto them using a preconscious instruction of how to read pictures, which is based on our cultural conditioning. Our experiences and knowledge play a major role in what we perceive.

Since the mid-1990s, landscape studies have focused on how the landscape is constructed in different cultures. Landscape is a term used in the humanities and social sciences, but the objects that constitute a landscape – mountains, clouds, trees, forests – are studied by the natural sciences. The concept of landscape has carried a range of meanings, varying from a territory to a view of nature. We have combined different aesthetic qualifications with landscape: it can be beautiful, sublime, picturesque, melancholic, heroic etc. Thus, landscape constitutes an aesthetic category. Today, when we think of an ideal landscape, we combine it with such concepts as diversity, originality and beauty. These are qualities that are also defined in several nature protection programmes.

Instead of regarding landscape as a genre of painting, it can be seen as a vast network of cultural codes, or as a natural scene that is mediated by culture. The landscape changes from being only an existing object into an active subject.



**Fanny Churberg, *Rapakivi Rocks*, 1871, oil on canvas fixed on panel, 29.5cm x 34cm**  
**Edvard Richter and Mandi Karnakoski-Richter Bequest,**  
**Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Antti Kuivalainen



Although landscape is a human construct, it can also be real. The reality of landscape is not based on how truthful a representation is, but the landscape becomes real by influencing the behaviour and action of people.

Our conceptions of nature concern the relationship of man with nature; hence, they describe man's feelings for nature and interpretations of it. There are two famous definitions of the concept of nature: the first is the so-called material definition given by Aristotle, who defined nature as something that takes shape and changes by itself. Therefore, it constitutes the opposite of something artificial produced by man; the second was introduced by Kant, who defined nature as the existence of things, which is ruled by general laws. In general, we regard nature as the opposite of artificial and as something omnipresent.

Over the course of time, landscape art has been influenced not only by art theory but also by attitudes towards nature. At the turn of the 19th century, the understanding of the non-human world changed. Later in the century, the progressive re-writing of Earth's history and re-evaluation of nature's powers had a great impact on attitudes in general. As well as aestheticians and philosophers, even some scientists participated in the discussion on the role of the arts in society, as well as their aesthetic qualifications, and how to define art in general. One such scientist was the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). Germany became the leading country in the natural sciences in the course of the 19th century, partly

due to the popularity of Humboldt's publications and the impact they had. Humboldt's writings reached the Nordic countries at an early stage. Humboldt's life work, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, was translated into Swedish soon after its publication, and several excerpts were issued by the Finnish senator, professor of philosophy and journalist Johan Vilhelm Snellman, in his newspaper *Litteraturbladet*.

As for art, Humboldt considered details to be important in sketches and studies, such as trees depicted individually or as groups, fallen tree trunks, treetops, bark and roots of trees, branches, rocks etc. Humboldt expected artists to use these kinds of details in their final compositions to show the typical features of a landscape. And yet the artists' task was not to imitate nature, but rather to express the fundamental and intellectual idea of their art.

In Finland, Zacharias Topelius, who was an author, a journalist, Secretary of the Finnish Art Society and a geography lecturer at the Imperial Alexander University, was also the first person in the country to teach geography; therefore he played a significant role in creating the image of Finland as a distinctive geographical unit. Due to the close alliance of different fields of natural sciences at the time, Topelius's activities were not limited to geography, as he also lectured on geology, botany and meteorology at the university.

Timothy F. Mitchell's pioneering book, *Art and Science in German Landscape Painting 1770–1840*, established a connection between German landscape painting and the natural sciences. There was a point in time when the understanding of nature changed, both in contemporary natural philosophy and in science, and correspondingly caused a shift of paradigm in landscape painting in the 1830s and 1840s. In Germany *Naturphilosophie* began giving way to new ideas, such as Positivism and Materialism, strengthening the position of an empirical approach in the sciences. It was also the time when new theories about the age of the planet were introduced. The role of experience, and especially sensory experience, also gained more and more ground. As a result, the empirical approach of the time, based on scientific methods in which observation and experiments formed the core of science, was widely applied in the natural sciences, where the role of the observer was emphasised.

In terms of producing knowledge today, we are inclined to think that art invents and science discovers; hence art is bound with imagination, whereas science deals with facts. This separation of art and science into two distinctive fields took place only in the late 19th century. Before that artists and scientists often worked alongside each other. Today, however, these two fields are coming closer once again and even meeting at some points. Many contemporary artists have an increasing interest in scientific methods, and they use these or combine them with their art. Although the intersections of art and science have been a major topic of academic discussion since the 1990s, this relationship in Düsseldorf landscape painting has not yet been addressed in Finnish art-historical discourse.

What is important here is the historio-social and temporal context, and how the general awareness of ideas concerning nature changed, as well as developments related to the history of nature. These changes created a mental and intellectual background for society. Therefore, I believe that the evolution of natural history into separate fields of the natural sciences, as well as the empiricist approach applied in the natural sciences, inspired artists to look for similar methods in their own work. If we compare this with the situation today, many artists are taking a stand on ecological issues such as climate change in their art and are also working together with scientists.

**Anne-Maria Pennonen's doctoral thesis *In Search of Scientific and Artistic Landscape – Düsseldorf Landscape Painting and Reflections of the Natural Sciences as Seen in the Artworks of Finnish, Norwegian and German Artists* (Finnish National Gallery Publications 3. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery 2020) is available at the Finnish National Gallery museum shop at <https://museoshop.fi/tuote/in-search-of-scientific-and-artistic-landscape/> and is also downloadable at [URN:ISBN:978-952-7371-10-7](https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-7371-10-7).**