

AWARENESS OF THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE: A  
THREE-PART STRATEGY ANALYZING THE LIVES  
AND WORKS OF LANDSCAPE PAINTERS FOR  
EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

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Problem. Art historical paintings of the natural landscape include many diverse examples: Italian artists painted Pompeiian walls with romantic Roman landscapes, Chinese landscape painters translated their feeling for nature into a pictorial language. The Dutch, the English, the French Impressionists, and the American Hudson River School, with their careful observation and keen perception, produced some of the finest landscape paintings. Loran (1943) in his book *Cezanne's Composition* mentioned a statement by Cezanne at the core of his study. This remark that "the painter ought to consecrate himself entirely to the study of nature and try to produce pictures which will be a teaching" (p. 15) may bear implications for art education. Though artists need not devote themselves entirely to a study of nature, their landscape paintings can be a tool for teaching. This study develops a strategy based on an educational approach to landscape painting. Many contemporary painters feel like Ibram Lassaw (1958) who stated that "observation of nature, both external and internal, is my constant preoccupation and source of inspiration (Baur, p. 73).

Seeking to understand artists' perceptions of the natural landscape may contribute toward development of perceptual awareness of it. In recent years there has been a growing concern for natural and man-made environments by some art educators (McFee, 1974, 1978; Logan, 1956), but the major emphasis has been in the area of environmental design and the built environment. Very little has been done in art education concerning the landscape; thus, art education may be one area for teaching awareness of that natural landscape through a study of the lives and works of landscape painters. Since the field of art education addresses the development of perceptual as well as conceptual skills, it is in the art classroom that young people may learn the skills of perception, receptivity, sensibility, responsiveness, and discrimination. This research is built on the assumptions that landscape painters possess these skills in relation to the natural landscape and that a study of their lives and works would be useful in understanding the content and sequencing of this information for educational purposes.

Purpose and research design. The study was designed as a three-part strategy to analyze the lives and works of landscape painters for educational purposes, and is part of a larger purpose to contribute to an education that fosters a heightened awareness of the natural landscape. This strategy consists of: (a) a literature review of 25 contemporary American landscape painters (The review of literature is divided into two sections: the first deals with the landscape artists and their painting as it expresses the natural landscape. The second section reviews the artists, their lives, world view, paintings, and the natural landscape.); (b) a case study of a single

landscape artist, Alexander Nepote, and his life, perceptions, world view, paintings, writings, and landscape, using observation, unstructured interview, and recorded data; and (c) a synthesis and analysis of these two parts. The information from both the literature review and the case study was organized, compared, and contrasted to generate categories. Organizing information in these categories and analyzing the artists, their lives, and their landscape paintings using Bloom's (1956, 1964) taxonomy helped assess the artists' placement of the categories and their use by artists at particular levels of complexity within the affective and cognitive domains. The technique of generating categories from literature using Jones' (1980) non-quantitative data analysis can be used to establish the scope of a subject matter area for educational purposes. The analysis of the lives and works of the artists using Bloom's taxonomy can be used to establish the sequencing of a topic in art education.

The painters were selected based on their being major American artists of the 1940s and 1950s and beyond doing primarily landscape painting. They included Milton Avery, Nell Blaine, Charles Burchfield, Arthur Dove, Richard Diebenkorn, Jane Freilicher, Helen Frankenthaler, Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, Edward Hopper, Wolf Kahn, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Fairfield Porter, Mark Rothko, Neil Welliver, and Andrew Wyeth. The categories were developed from readings in art education, from books about the lives and works of the artists, and from the case study. Relating to the "artists, their painting and the natural landscape," information was resolved into the categories of: description, perception, organization, materials and methods, interpretation, expression, creative process, world view, and ecology. Relating to the "artists, their education, and the landscape," the categories were formulated to note any influences of an artist's early education and perceptions on later painting and awareness of the natural landscape. This information was resolved into the categories of: formal and informal education, and early landscape awareness. The categories from the literature review and the case study provided a way to establish the scope of a subject matter area; Bloom's taxonomy provided a way to establish the sequencing of a topic.

The artists, the painting, and the natural landscape. The painters approached their paintings and landscape in a variety of ways, describing places they knew and had experienced, whether earth forms, mountain terrain, water environments, a sky world, or plant-life. Artists related to an inner landscape, an outer, or employed both responses; they painted visual impressions of the landscape, imagined impressions, and the experience of the landscape, its sounds, textures, smells, and movement. Painters expressed the quality of light in landscape, the separate seasons, and series of paintings on a single landscape theme.

Not content simply to describe a landscape, some artists work symbolically to express their ideas or emotions. The ability, however, to respond to art and the natural landscape is not only a matter of describing the landscape, interpreting meanings, decoding symbols, searching for expressive quality, and learning about the artistic heritage; it involves, as well, the development of perceptual abilities as a basic part of the artistic activity of landscape painters.

The concern for formal order in the landscape paintings studied is also evident. Hofmann had a very thorough comprehension of pictorial laws, the

picture plane, movement, light and color, the aim and nature of art, creation, relationships, the media of expression, and even of enjoyment. Through his long years of distilling, working, and teaching within the major art movements of twentieth century painting, he was able to achieve an effortless mastery of means.

Dove worked to bridge the distance between nature and art, to paint the essence, the quality, the spirit of an object or landscape, the idea behind the image. Dove lived, worked, and perceived as "an inseparable part" of the natural order, not as an outside observer, and he communicated this feeling of oneness with nature in all his works (Haskell, 1974).

The artists were shaped by different places, experiences, and education. Most of them grew up in the Northeast, with the exception of Graves in the Northwest, Diebenkorn in California, and O'Keeffe and Burchfield in the Midwest. These early places had a significant influence on their landscape imagery, though some came later to a new landscape interest, as did O'Keeffe and Taylor in the Southwest. Of the foreign-born, Kahn, Hofmann, Rothko, it was Gorky who continually returned to the Armenian landscapes of his memory.

The artists developed their awareness and understanding of painting and the natural world in both large and small families, they became interested in art early or late, and acquired varying degrees of formal and informal academic and art education. It is not possible in such a brief study to establish if many of the artists had a seminal experience in nature, or a mentor as did Dove in his naturalist neighbor. Many, perhaps, discovered landscape on their own and increased their awareness of it gradually, as did Wyeth in rambles around his Chadds Ford environment, or Graves in discoveries of his Puget Sound region.

Like the work of Kahn, Porter, Dove, and Marin, White's painting is an "enthusiastic and moving response to nature, not . . . a flat and meticulous description of details." His ability to "transmit precisely what he sees, fears, or dreams about" (Wolff, 1983, p. 18) illustrates the unique and differing relationships and perceptions he and other artists have had with landscapes and paintings. The analysis of the lives and works of these artists may be useful in art education to assist in designing educational materials to foster a keener perception and awareness of the natural landscape.

Alexander Nepote, his paintings, and the natural landscape. Nepote seems to have always worked with a landscape theme, particularly segments of landscape: cliffs, rocks, and shore interspersed with the color and textural detail of cascades, tidepools, grasses, roots, and leaves. The mountains of California, the Pacific coast, and the Southwest desert are his places, and these places are generic, not specific pieces of landscape. They represent a synthesis of deeper realities, a suggestion that the transitory things of nature are not the real reality. Nepote works to express the seen and unseen qualities in a landscape more than a literal representation. With a highly developed sense of perception, which he calls multidimensional, he works to express the feel, the sound, and the smell of the landscape along with the image of it. At all times he works to maintain a technical and expressive wholeness of relationships within the painting, as well as his own relationship to the whole natural world. In working to express his "life of feelings," the essence, or the universal quality

of landscape, he works at the highest level in the affective and cognitive domains of the Bloom Taxonomy: living and embodying a complex of values into a total world view, and expressing that on paper.

Analysis. Generating the categories from the literature review and the case study established the scope of a subject matter area, using the Bloom taxonomy established the sequencing of a topic. It seemed an effective method of analysis of subjective data as it assessed the artists' skills within the categories relative to the affective and cognitive domains of the taxonomy. The categories themselves were analyzed to determine levels of complexity on the continua of the taxonomy in both affective and cognitive domains.

Conclusion. It was assumed that the artists of the study seemed to have a higher degree of awareness, were more receptive, and more focused in attention to the landscape than other folk. They were apparently more capable and willing to respond, and gained satisfaction through that response in painting. These components and others of the affective and cognitive domains of the taxonomy were noticed in the painting, writing, and interviews with the artists. By studying the components of the taxonomy as related to the study, and how they came into being, it may be possible to design experiences to increase the awareness, receptivity, focused attention, and expressive response for others. It is interesting that the skills of the taxonomy, awareness, attention, keen perception, sharpened intuition, sensibility and receptivity are the same skills Nepote emphasized as important for artists. The use of the Bloom taxonomy made it possible to compare, contrast, or evaluate the level of complexity of landscape artists in relation to the content of the categories. This strategy may be useful for a sequential study of other artists, for a better understanding of painters, their lives and their works, and for a more valid base for critical analysis.

Since perception can be taught and learned, this study may provide a strategy for increasing awareness and perception of the natural landscape through a study of painters and paintings of it.

Recommendations. A more comprehensive study of fewer artists and a smaller time frame is suggested in future studies of this nature. The strategy in this study of awareness may provide the foundational first step for a similar study that fosters concern for the natural landscape through the study of paintings. Research to more clearly define an art education that would be effective in fostering an early awareness of the natural landscape is recommended.

Instructional materials developed by art educators on the subject of this study are needed. Teachers and school administrators may recognize the importance of this subject area enough to include a study of the natural landscape through a study of the lives and works of landscape painters within the curriculum.

Implications. The technique of generating categories from literature using Jones' (1980) non-quantitative data analysis can be used to establish the scope of a subject matter area for educational purposes. The analysis of the life and work of the artists using Bloom's taxonomy can be used to establish the sequencing of a topic in art education. In this study, the lives

and works of landscape painters provided the subject matter focus for these analytical strategies. These strategies could be applied to other similar topics, such as the lives and works of still-life painters or the lives and works of non-figurative sculptors.

The educational opportunities and methods for developing an awareness of the natural landscape through a study of landscape painters, seem limitless. Painters have recorded many different aspects of the landscape: regional landscape characteristics, history of the land, and changing attitudes about the land. Artists have painted the elements of the landscape, land, sky, water, vegetation, and microcosmic and macrocosmic views of them; they have painted the built environment, the times of day, and seasons of the year, and in doing so have provided different ways of looking at the land and becoming more aware of it. Painters have expressed in their works an ability to see and experience, to touch, hear, and smell the landscape. They have helped others become aware of the elements and principles of art in the natural landscape. Lastly, some painters have shown how their awareness has become an ecological concern for the landscape. In all, a study of landscape painters, their lives, and the variety of ways in which they interpret and express that landscape may indeed significantly increase an awareness of the natural landscape. This study encourages such an expanded education in art.

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