

SYMMETRY AND LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATION: INTERNAL ORDER AND PICTURESQUE SINGULARITY

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Oliver J.C., (2022). Mallorca (Balearic Islands) in the Visual Culture and Stereoscopic Photography of the First Decades of the 20th Century: Psychiatrist and Amateur Photographer Jaume Escalas Real. *Journal on S&I Media*. <https://revistas.ulsofona.pt/index.php/stereo/article/view/7729>

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Abstract: *This work analyses the presence of graphic examples and geometric orientation models of certain landscape compositions or natural processes, arranged in artistic literature as a repertoire of practical cases. Among them, we specify those where the notion of symmetry had special importance for said transmission, understanding it under a historical and aesthetic meaning where it has been linked to the application of harmonic theories in art. In an etymological sense, we understand in this text the notion of symmetry as a correspondence between parts of a whole from the historical conception established by Vitruvius, according to which it is born from the proportion to be the cause of a final composition (compositio). Historical-artistic literature allows a graphic and conceptual itinerary to be established through images that end up forming an iconographic corpus of graphic examples that place the landscape image under precepts related to geometric rationalization or use these precepts to propose an intuitive alternative related to with direct observation of nature.*

Keywords: Landscape, Symmetry, Landscape Representation, Geometric Landscape, Picturesque.

INTRODUCTION

A set of historiographic contributions related to the history of pictorial and photographic landscape representation from the 18th century to the present day, mainly affect its aesthetic, communicative, social or ideological conditioning factors (Maderuelo, 2005; Roger, 1997; Nogué and Vela, 2011). In conjunction with these approaches, historical artistic literature makes it possible to establish a graphic and conceptual itinerary through some images that ended up forming an iconographic corpus of graphic models on this genre. These models place the landscape image under precepts related

to geometric rationalization, or they use these precepts to propose an intuitive alternative related to the direct observation of nature.

This work analyses the presence of graphic examples and geometric orientation models of certain landscape compositions or natural processes, arranged in artistic literature as a repertoire of practical cases. Among them, we specify those where the notion of symmetry had special importance for said transmission, understanding it under a historical and aesthetic meaning where it has been linked to the application of harmonic theories in art. In an etymological sense, we understand in this text the notion of symmetry as a correspondence between parts of a whole from the historical conception established by Vitruvius, according to which it is born from the proportion to be the cause of a final composition (*compositio*).

LANDSCAPE AND INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF NATURE

Some aesthetic debates on the mimetic essence of the arts and the relationship between natural beauty and artistic beauty, from the 18th century approaches to romantic idealism, have had as their background the need for art to imitate or be based on the so-called internal structure of nature, thus escaping from an epidermal or superficial representation of its appearance. From the Neoplatonic conception, the art or the artist is capable of imitating the tendency to the archetype of natural elements, their ideal configuration as *natura naturans* (Spaemann, R., 2006). It is known that the Greek conception of existing proportions in art linked this notion of *symmetry* to an absolute, rational, and archetypal beauty, in contrast to the *eurythmy* referred to the beauty of perceptions (Tartakiewicz, 2006, p. 121). Along with this classic vision of symmetry, which appeals to pre-established geometric models referring to the structure or internal order of the elements, a new conception of symmetry was created in the context of the *naturphilosophie* and the historicist and pre-romantic vision, entering the 19th century. This vision will have its echoes in the landscape representation, not only with the adoption of the new sense of picturesque (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988), but also, for what interests us here, with the creation of a set of renewed images proposed as examples of a new organic structure of the observed landscape.

We mention some works in the representation of compositional models linked to art and aesthetics literature that seek to propose structures prior to the artist, in an area so indeterminate, and sometimes so alien to geometrization, as the representation of the landscape is. Alexander Cozens' publication, *A new Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1785) was a starting point for the creation and conceptualization of a landscape that exemplified the search for a true and beautiful nature in some "general principles", that respond to other criteria than direct observation:

Composing landscapes by invention is not the art of imitating individual nature; it is more; it is forming artificial representations of landscape on the general principles of nature, founded in unity of character, which is true simplicity. (Cozens, 1785, p. VII).

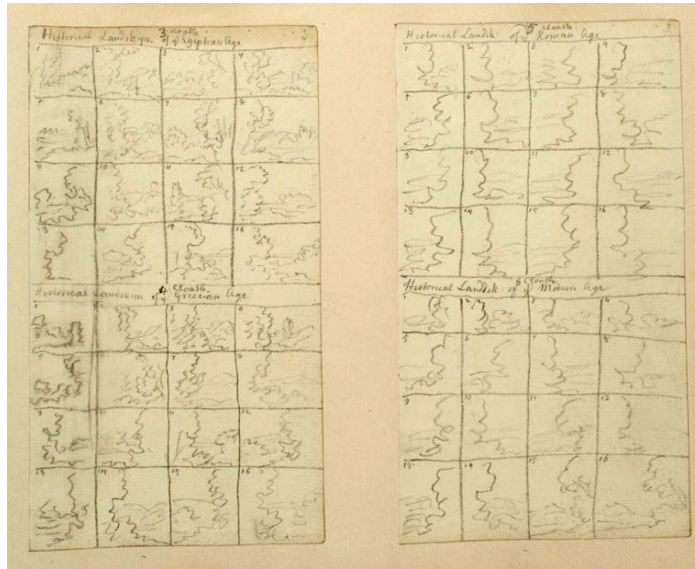


Figure 1 Alexander Cozens, *Illustrating Principles of Landskip*.¹

The basis of these general principles of representation, which gave way to an intuitive geometry, still reminiscent of classicist conceptions but glimpsing the rejection of the notion of symmetry as the only proportional articulation of the scene, took place in the literature of authors such as William Gilpin (1794), Thomas Noble (1809), Jean Pierre Thenot (1834) or Jean Bonaventure Laurens (1849), among others. His publications exemplified with numerous images what should be a new understanding of the landscape space apparently alien to compositional regularity, in the former cases, and with special emphasis on the tension between symmetry and organicism in the latter.

Specifically, the treatise by J. B. Laurens, *Théorie du beau pittoresque démontrée dans ses applications à la composition* (1849), problematizes the *landscape-portrait* notion, a landscape created from the invention independently of observation, where certain examples of composition are geometrically projected. In this field, where the interest in direct visuality did not replace geometrization, the representation of the landscape adapts to new compositional schemes and creative processes based on "variety and contrast" in conjunction with the "analogy of proportions", sometimes linked to an intuitive sense of proportion or referring to the superposition of basic geometric shapes (Laurens) or proportional perspective sections (Noble).

In the field of aesthetic and artistic legitimation of the photographic medium, the relationship of compositional schemes based on geometric arrangements also deserved some reference in the literature of the medium (Abney, 1878; Robinson, 1869). Compositional schemes based on geometric

proportions, their underlying arrangement in the image, represented a point of contact between the arts and photography, whose aesthetic charge could no longer derive from merely technical or stylistic aspects, but from structural and compositional aspects. In artistic photography, with a naturalistic tradition and with continuity in pictorial aspects, the compositional structure could occupy a priority place compared to the type of image and the medium used, in the same way that it could do it in a pictorial composition. In this sense, the considerations on the internal structure of the landscape and its relations with previous compositional methods based on notions of symmetry acquire a prominent place in the work *Pictorial Effect in Photography* (1869) by Henry P. Robinson, one of the crucial works in the historical literature of photography. The author leads one of his chapters on landscape representation with a fragment by John Ruskin alluding to the desire to give the image uniqueness and coherence:

Another important means of expressing unity is to mark some kind of sympathy among the different objects, and perhaps the pleasantest, because most surprising, kind of sympathy, is when one group imitates or repeats another: not in the way of balance or symmetry, but subordinately, like & far away, and broken echo of it. (Ruskin cited in Robinson, 1869, p. 75).

FORMAL UNITY

The idea of formal unity or homogeneous representation had previously been considered the result of the proportional and geometric structure, while now it attends to subjective, perceptual factors, which appeal to a certain "sympathy" between elements that is not reduced to terms of strict symmetry. Even so, Robinson, for his part, continues to consider symmetry as a "secondary quality" (Robinson, p. 73), and in his illustrations he continues to propose possible propositional schemes and optimal frames for landscaping treatment. The illustrated principle of "uniformity in variety", inherited from the English empiricist aesthetic tradition, allowed Robinson to again justify the use of a certain compositional symmetry:

Simplicity, symmetry, and uniformity, strange as it may appear, are not antagonistic to variety, but are, in the extensive scale of nature, highly conducive to it, especially in scenes composed of many objects. Uniformity in a single figure will produce monotony; but in a scene composed of many figures it will add to the variety, for if the greater number of figures be irregular and vased, the introduction of repetition in some of the objects will actually increase the variety. (Robinson, 1896, p. 73).

Ruskin had illustrated this desire to combine the visible and direct representation of the landscape with his geometric conceptualization of natural processes, in some illustrations of *The Stones of*

Venice (1880) (Figure 3). In parallel, the understanding of the landscape through its geometrization and search for internal structure, left more evident examples in the work of Viollet de Duc, whose illustrations in *Le massif du Mont-Blanc* (1876) also reflect, apart from the rationalized view of the morphology of the mountain itself and its geographical features (Figure 4), some natural processes of erosion, crystallization or formation translated into a specific graphic language. This kind of thinking is linked to a trend of graphic representation where it is intended to deduce geometry through one's own observation, linking with a process of abstraction that would have evident echoes in the artistic proposals that advanced from synthetism to the later cubist avant-gardes and some Bauhaus approaches and concrete art.

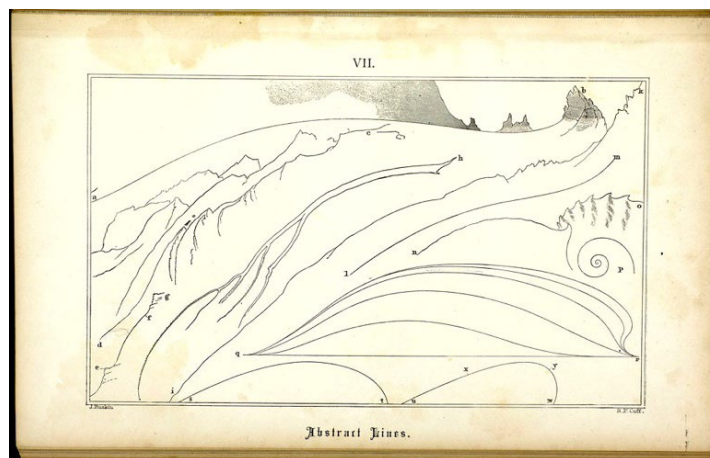


Figure 2 John Ruskin, *Abstract Lines*, in *The Stones of Venice*, New York: J. Wiley & sons, 1880.²

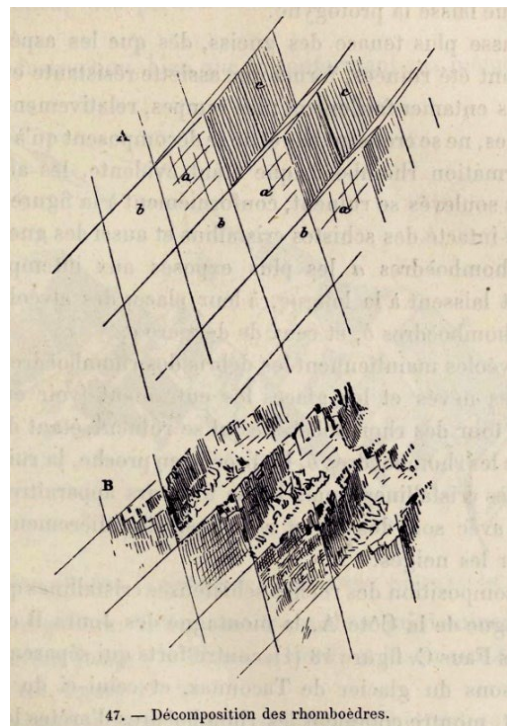


Figure 3 Viollet Le-Duc, *Décomposition des romboèdres*, *Le massif du Mont-Blanc, étude sur sa construction géodésique et géologique, sur ses transformations et sur l'état ancien et moderne de ses glaciers*, Paris: J. Baudry, 1876.³

CONCLUSION

Landscape implies perception or direct observation of the territory, but it was a particularly prolific genre to understand how the different forms of interpretation of nature were translated into graphic models of various kinds, artistic, academic or scientific, which ended up acting as a counterpoint to said observation. In them, it can be understood that the picturesque aesthetic approaches did not displace the desire for geometric rationalization of the art scene, even with the evident presence of a critical background towards the traditional notion of symmetry.

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² Source: from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30754/30754-h/30754-h.htm>

³ Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5400922n/f120.item.r=Systeme%20rhomboedrique>

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