Images and Anxieties in 19th Century Landscape Painting: Pittsburgh and Allegheny County

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Pittsburgh in the nineteenth-century is a well documented city of contradictions. The emerging wealth of mine and mill owners contrasted with urban poverty amidst the raw natural beauty of the three rivers and an evergrowing industrial cityscape. This cityscape would ultimately include the sprawling steel mills where -- along riverbanks transformed into industrial ports -- the poorest laborers and their families would work and live. Artists painting in Allegheny County during this time were by no means outside of these social and ecological contradictions. Their works often indirectly express, and occasionally directly engage, emerging anxieties about the relationships between humans, industry, capital, and the natural world. A close examination of some of the paintings from this period helps us to understand the historic relationship between industry, art, people, and nature in the Allegheny County region.

As Industry grew in western Pennsylvania and northwestern Virginia paintings like Thomas Rossiter’s *The Opening of the Wilderness* (figure 1) expressed a sense that the regional progress of humans came at a cost to the natural world. The clearcut trees, smoking train engines, and darkening sky evoke an image of industrial growth at odds with a preexisting wilderness. Rather than progress evoking the image of a new dawn, or heroic conquer, the progress of the train into the foreground brings the image of twilight to the wilderness.
Unlike paintings such as William Sonntag’s *Scene near Grafton* (figure 2) -- which reassures the viewer of the endless expanse and magnitude of nature -- Rossiter’s work gives a foreboding image where trees are stripped and cleared and trains become the landscape. Sonntag’s work, by comparison, renders human encroachment small and unobtrusive. In *Scene Near Grafton* the humans and their simple wooden building are dwarfed by an endless and mysterious rivervalley, one cast in soft misty sunrise tones and colorful fall hues. Sonntag’s work reassures the viewer that man’s needs are indeed in concert with nature’s. Rossiter’s work disturbs such a vision. The endless wilderness becomes finite and destructable. Paintings such as *The Opening of the Wilderness* spoke directly to the anxieties emerging in the time of rapid industrial expansion. The painting questions the ways in which man’s dominance over nature will significantly transform his relationship with nature.
Not all landscape painters were able to articulate the contradictions of the expanse of a modern industrial world onto a wild landscape so directly. Most paintings were engaged, like Sonntag’s, with a story wherein human progress and nature were complimentary. Alfred Wall was a Pittsburgh artist whose painting, *Old Saw Mill* (figure 3) represents a more sentimental version of humans at peace with nature through the use of nature. Like Sonntag, Wall surrounds his people with a bounty of resources—trees, water, and light—which they have put to use, creating an image where man and nature coexist harmoniously.

Alfred’s son A. Bryan Wall would become one of the best known local landscape painters in 19th Century Pittsburgh. His paintings of Western Pennsylvania also depict humans in harmony with their natural world. Less sentimental than *Old Saw Mill*, the younger Wall’s *Landscape* (figure 4) is typical of contemporary topics for landscape painters. The scene depicts a shepherd and his dog tending a flock of sheep in the early fall. Typical of much late Barbizon style, the painting evokes a pastoral theme: one which idealizes the simplicity of a lone man in communion with his natural surroundings. The man in the painting is both a part of nature and a guardian of it. As a shepherd he is a person who spends time in nature with animals. He also protects and cultivates aspects of the natural world for use by humans.
This well known painting offers up ideas about man’s relation to the natural world which nineteenth-century audiences would be familiar with. It is at once a view of the domestic world, the man herding sheep toward the viewer in the foreground, and the wild one. The latter is evidenced by the mass of softly lit woods on the horizon which the shepherd gazes toward. As this painting evokes the pastoral it invokes a reassuring and idealistic image of man’s use of natural resources (animals here) as sensible and in balance with the world around him.

Wall is not the only painter to describe the region in such idealistic terms. Even more idealistic, George Hertzel’s *Woodland Stream* (figure 5) offers up a highly romanticized view of a natural setting which is simultaneously awesome and welcoming. It is a scene which increases the scale of nature and eliminates humans from the subject proper. Yet, like Wall’s more domesticated vision of the natural world Hertzel’s "wild" nature is notably non-threatening. Soothed by warm sunlight and cool blue shadows the water and towering trees evoke a natural world which man appreciates, watches and values for the sake of its untamed beauty. The small roses in Woodland stream -- traditional symbols of human feelings, love, and chivalry -- lend a comforting air to the picture. For the viewer, they provide the human scale (and an element of domestic familiarity) to what could have been an image of foreboding or impenetrable wilderness. Man’s relationship with and place in nature is mediated by the familiar symbol of the rose. As a flower which is found in the wild and also cultivated by humans, the rose links the ideas of wilderness and garden. Natural beauty is simultaneously domesticated and idealized. Hertzel’s *Rocky Gorge* (figure 6) evokes a similar sensibility.
Figure 5.
George Hertzel, *Woodland Stream*, 1880
Carnegie Museum of Art
Hertzel and Wall painted in styles familiar and acceptable to local collectors. Their works were exhibited and collected by both Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick. (This was unusual for local artists, as the collections of Pittsburgh’s wealthy art patrons were predominately composed of European works. Hertzel and Wall’s ability to create an aesthetic image of Pennsylvania and Allegheny County which resonated with works by celebrated European painters, such as Millet, enabled their success.)

An image of the wilderness as vast yet approachable, was certainly important to economic and industrial development. Images such as Hertzel’s and Wall’s, along with similar images by Miller (figure 7), harmonized with a vision of the region as an endless natural resource supplying both economic and spiritual well-being.

Ironically, the very need to create such images -- ones which offer a reassuring story of the natural world -- exposes underlying anxieties about human relationships to nature. As the industrial landscape of Pittsburgh was growing ever larger, paintings of natural scenes were more and more important. Artists had to go further outside of the city to capture their idyllic images and poor and lower middle-class urban residents (who lacked the economic resources to travel to the country) were increasingly isolated from the very natural amenities which initially defined the city.
As the ecological impacts of industrialization became undeniable towards the end of the nineteenth century many regional artists turned toward the image of industry as a topic. In these paintings rivers are reduced to shippingways which support mills bellowing smoke. In Fritz Thaulow’s images of the Monogahela (figures 8 and 9) the polluted air and water take on a strangely beautiful dreamlike quality -- rendering the familiar image foreign to the viewer’s eye. Although The Smokey City does show a few discernable figures on the street, both emphasize the scale of industry. The rivers themselves become a part of a mottled scene where nature becomes significant only in terms of its subordination to the economic interests of local industry.
Ironically, period paintings in local collections and popular illustrations often depicted an idealized vision of the laborer and the natural world. Wall’s *Landscape* and locally exhibited works by international artists such as Dagnanbouvert (figure 10) present rustic images of the laborer which were reflected in popular illustrations (figure 11). In these images the working classes are presented in an unquestionable and organic relationship with their natural world. Here the idea of domesticity mingle with images of wilderness. Yet, photographic images show that the experience of Pittsburgh’s working classes was diametrically opposed to such a vision. It was decidedly urban and lacking in natural amenities.
The images of tenement housing and neighborhood streets emphasize the complete lack of amenities for the city's working poor (figures 11 and 12).

Figure 12.

Photographer unknown, Tenement District, Pittsburgh c. 1900.
Sadly, many of the same wealthy families involved in collecting the art which idealized the local natural landscape were simultaneously involved in eliminating it from the city proper (see Weisberg, Collecting in the Guilded Age, 1997). The final compensation for workers in 1875 was the establishment of “The Pittsburgh Association for the improvement of the Poor.” Like later groups it dealt almost exclusively with the most basic of subsistence issues, for the orphans and widows of mine and mill accidents.

Photographic images of Pittsburgh’s urban poverty would become very familiar to 20th Century viewers. The riverbanks of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers would slowly transform into the backdrop for the grimy urban reality which became infamous (figure 13). Still, Many popular illustrations from the nineteenth century attempted to “document” the growth of the county’s industry in an idealized manner. One even goes so far as to represent Pittsburgh simultaneously as a busy industrial port and idyllic country setting. The City of Pittsburgh illustration published in 1822 foregrounds a scene of trees and wilderness overlooking downtown.

Figure 13.
Frederick Gutenkunst, Pittsburgh from Junction of Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, ca. 1870. Private Collection. Nicholas and Maralyn Graver
Set in the spring the picture advertises a bustling (and clean) industrial city, liesurely gazed upon by a couple of some means (as evidenced by their attire) from across the river. Like other illustrations from the century this illustration renders a quaint view of “civilization”. Pittsburgh is a city which sits easily in its natural environment. Something to be regarded as a symbol of human creation and progress. Like the landscape painter’s image of idealized wilderness, these optimistic, civic-minded representations (of a city with green spaces integrated with urban industry) speak to emerging anxieties about the effects of industrial and economic progress on human/nature relationships. These popular images mirror the needs of artists such as Wall and Hertzel: to reconcile an economic progress narrative and aesthetic idealization of the natural world. As the natural world becomes an aestheticized image, far away from the daily lives of citizens, it also becomes a kind of rarefied product. One that must be bought like any other luxury.
Though romantic evocations of nature were popular among nineteenth-century collectors, images of the region’s mills, industrial waterfronts, and workers were increasing (as shown by Thallow’s work earlier). These images, like the industry itself, would disrupt forever the idyllic image of Allegheny County’s wilderness. Thomas Anshuntz’s 1896 painting, *Steamboat on the Ohio* (figure 14) shows a vision of an organic relationship between humans and nature being disrupted by industrial progress. Here, people are of the river and of nature. The nude swimmers standing in the foreground convey an image of natural man, communing with his natural environment. This relationship is disrupted and displaced by the coming steamboat and the mills on the opposite bank. The river becomes a trafficway for shipping and is no longer safe for enjoyment by people. Like *The Opening of the Wilderness* discussed earlier, *Steamboat on the Ohio* illustrates the conflict between viewing nature as an economic resource and an aesthetic amenity. Anshuntz’s painting reminds the viewer that the rivers came to be seen almost exclusively in light of the former by the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, the painting problematizes this fate and can help raise new questions about our relationships to the region’s waterways, as a part of the “natural” world we inhabit and seek-- like the young swimmers -- to be a part of and enjoy.

![Figure 14. Thomas Anshuntz, Steamboat on the Ohio, 1896. Oil on canvas. 27 1/4 x 48 1/4 in. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh PA.](image-url)
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Bibliography and Further Reading


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