

Landscape Photography 2. Since 1920

Modernism and the Landscape

The First World War was a cultural as well as a political, social and economic watershed. The modern machine age had arrived, and with it a new non-deferential, democratic era that swept away traditions in favour of progress. Modernism had a profound effect on photography and progress transformed the landscape. Landscape photographers began to move away from painterly effects created by soft focus lenses and interfering with the surface of the negative or print. They sought to exploit the medium's ability to render fine detail and reveal the subtleties of tonal gradation in monochrome prints. For them, this *straight* approach was what made photography unique. Although it had its antecedents in the topographical photography of the 19th century, it was seen as distinctively modern and in tune with the European *New Objectivity** movement that was to influence photographers based on the west coast of the America led by Edward Weston*, Imogen Cunningham*, and Ansel Adams*. Landscape and nature were their principal motifs and they later formed the f64 Group* in 1930. The group produced exquisitely crafted prints which transformed the subject matter into a photographically aesthetic experience rather than simply a record of what was in front of the camera. However, it would be misleading to think that Pictorialism* with its legions of proponents of the pastoral idyll had been replaced by this modernist precisionism. Far from it. This style remained popular amongst most landscapists and dominated the photographic salons and camera clubs, as the pages of the *Amateur Photographer* (London) from the interwar years will attest.

Metaphor and Transcendentalism

After 1920 many landscape photographers also sought to reflect the expressive potential in significant details abstracted from within the more inclusive and traditional views of the countryside. The metaphoric possibilities in this form of photographic seeing were complemented by making the resultant print an object of contemplation – the aesthetic event – rather than a mirror held up to nature. A major figure of this era was Alfred Stieglitz*, who as a gallery owner in New York helped introduce Modern Art to the United States, and as a photographer, like his friends, Paul Strand* and Edward Steichen*, discarded the manipulatory methods of the Photo-Secessionists*. Using basic, uncomplicated techniques, he photographed clouds, trees, and grasses to evoke experiences and feelings in a manner comparable to the way that music does. It was a more subjective and meditative approach to photographing the landscape, and though his *equivalents* only captured the imagination of a few photographers and museum curators at the time, Stieglitz's influence has been long-lasting with the torch being taken up by Minor White* and Paul Caponigro* in particular. Their contributions can be associated with the rise of Western interest in oriental religions and philosophies, and the meditation movements which started in the 1960s. British-based photographers influenced by this philosophical and subjective approach included Raymond Moore*, Thomas J. Cooper and John Blakemore.

The Adams Factor

If there is one figure who stands out in the history of 20th century landscape photography it is Ansel Adams. He not only refined the appeal of the genre through his monographs and technical handbooks, he was also a leading conservationist in America, who had the ear of US presidents, and was one of the first photographers to ultimately be able to live off the sales of his prints.

By the 1970s the finely crafted landscape print had become a collectable art object and the best examples were eagerly acquired by museum curators, exhibited in newly created photographic galleries, and sold through old established auction houses at prices that photographers could have only dreamed about a few years before. The Ansel Adams 'industry' played a major role in popularising landscape photography and the buying of photographs for domestic as well as public consumption.

But for some, there was an innate conservatism in the fully tonal 'fine' print approach. European photographers, Bill Brandt*, Hugo von Wadenoyen* and Otto Steinert* preferred their landscape photographs to have more dramatic contrast between tones and a greater degree of formalism in their composition.

New Topographics

As photography's cultural prominence increased in the last quarter of the 20th century, more and more practitioners began to question the accepted parameters of the landscape genre. They did not wish to evoke the monumental, the mysterious or the metaphoric in their photographs, preferring a less obviously expressive mode. Called *New Topographics**, its advocates in the USA and Europe presented undramatic views that tended to concentrate on content rather than form or mood. Mankind's effect on the land was more relevant to them than evocations of pastoral bliss or the wonders and mysteries of Nature. Although there were similarities to the topographical frontiersmen of the 19th century, the photographs were more than mere records. They offered a subtle critique of insensitive building and land use that did not overtly direct the viewer to a specific point of view. The polemic was 'cool' and understated, like their tonally muted prints.

Colour

The technical advances in colour photography after World War II had a massive impact on landscape photography. The majority of photographers, particularly amateurs, wanted accurate, colourful representations of what they saw in nature and the countryside. 35mm colour reversal film was universally available and the world, as mediated through sitting room slide shows and publications like *National Geographic**, became exuberantly polychromatic. Colour printing was much more problematic, but the improved dye-incorporation method for films and papers made colour almost as user-friendly as black and white. The beginning of this century has seen digital technology and inkjet printing almost eliminate the conventional colour darkroom whilst offering colourists new creative opportunities.

Art and Politics

Although these technical developments encouraged many landscape photographers to move to colour, there were other factors that provoked the move too. These were

more to do with shifts in contemporary culture and politics and the emergence of the colour photographic print as the increasingly preferred medium of the fine artist. Contemporary landscape photographers now make work largely for an art gallery audience . They also undertake well-researched thematic projects which are ideologically or geographically specific rather than produce a melange of their 'greatest hits' . Grant aid and sponsorship has helped exhibitions and publications of landscape work reach a wide public .The variety of possibilities for the dissemination of work has offered photographers who want to engage with enviromental issues and the politics of the countryside platforms for their ideas and beliefs .

Opportunities to comment critically on the effects of industrialisation , ownership and access , commodification of heritage , and even concerns relating to race, class , and gender have been taken up by photographers who live in a post-industrial , postmodern world that would have seemed unimaginable in 1920 . Photographers like Robert Adams * , Keith Arnatt , John Davies , Fay Godwin* , John Kippin , Karen Knorr , Ingrid Pollard , Richard Misrach* , Jem Southam , for example , reflect the diversity of ideologies and styles - from descriptive documentary forms , ironic juxtapositions , revealing narratives to the application of text to images which give added cultural and political references - that have become the photographic currency of today .

PH

Haworth Booth M. *The Land: Twentieth Century Landscape Photographs* (1975)

Jussim E. & Lindquist-Cock E. *Landscape as Photograph* (1985)

Taylor J. *A Dream of England* (1994)

Wells L., Newton K. & Fehily C. *Shifting Horizons* (2000)

1296 words (*incl biblio.*)