

Denis Ribouillault and Michel Weemans, eds. *Le paysage sacré: Le paysage comme exégèse dans l'Europe de la première modernité / Sacred Landscape: Landscape as Exegesis in Early Modern Europe*.

Giardini e Paesaggio 29. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011. xxxi + 368 pp. €48. ISBN: 978-88-222-6126-7.

This scholarly and richly illustrated anthology is an attempt to contextualize the enormous cluster that is the landscape genre in the early modern Netherlands, Southern Germany, Italy, and France. We speak of a typology that encompasses artistic representations in painting, emblematic literature, sculpture, and garden architecture. In spite of its distinct identity in terms of content and its role as a *fabrique culturelle*, the landscape genre, however, lacks in fact an unequivocal semantic unity as found in the portrait or the still-life genre. This polysemy is due precisely to its wide range of compositional figurations that lead inevitably to a great deal of disparate approaches. Thus the attempt to articulate a common interpretational thread like the one proposed here appears as a desideratum in this field of research.

In the preface, the editors thoroughly define the issue of analysis. The prevalence of natural sceneries in early modern painting, graphical arts, and architecture reflects the “secularization” of the sentiment of nature. Concerning this, the editors narrow down this artistic stock focusing only on so-called “sacred landscapes” (ix–xxvi). The sacred attribute is set against the principle of the religious because these images do not actually serve a religious practice. On the contrary, the landscapes instead function as metaphors exploited to evoke an awareness of the sacred, thus becoming the stage for a performance that aims to the production of holiness. Moreover, this genre becomes an instrument of an actual exegesis, whereby the image does not merely illustrate scripture, but visualizes an interpretation of spiritual significance.

This contextualization operates beyond the margins of traditional art theories, putting disciplines like art history, theology (including soteriology), political history, numismatics, and epigraphy into reciprocal agency. Biblical textual criticism and a hermeneutical approach interact on equal terms. Through detailed description, the authors emphasize distinct compositional elements in order to elaborate on their semantic meaning. Fortunately, this hermeneutical decipherment does not become too abstract as its immediate relation to the art work remains the key principle. From this perspective, most explorations are methodical and well structured.

On the premises of the dichotomy of the book of nature and of the book of scripture the authors derive their lines of rhetoric and argumentation by arranging consistently complementary opposites or dualisms. Reindert Falkenburg uses the example of Joachim Patinir’s paintings to trace the occurring passage from mere vision toward intellectual discernment. Hence, compositional details have the function of directing the eye beyond the superficial observation of the world by implying an act of interior judgment and reflection on the dialectics of vision.

Meanwhile, Michel Weemans employs the compositions of Herri met de Bles to elaborate on the transition from the narrative's literality toward the spirituality given by the truth of the scriptures. In accordance with Erasmus of Rotterdam, allegory becomes the medium that makes the unveiling of this truth possible.

Similarly, additional authors discuss the artists' accumulation of a multitude of disparate figures and objects in complex spaces and how all these elements have to be seen as part of the narration. But what kind of seeing do these compositions evoke? It seems that a meditative matrix overlaps this seeing, which initiates the hermeneutical process.

This inspiring anthology is an excellent source for both young students and advanced scholars, as it provides a systematic approach to both the heuristic role of the landscape genre and the cultural backdrop of the humanistic reasoning and treatment of modern exegesis.

The compendium is on the one hand a coherent compilation, and on the other an excellent blend of content and commentary. The quality of the numerous comparative illustrations is outstanding; they are carefully chosen and well reproduced. The main language of the texts is French with a few exceptions in English, but the speech is clear and approachable while remaining at all times precise. At the same time it is quite admirable how the authors comply meticulously with the underlying task called out in the title. Now and again, the authors themselves follow "an acrobatic line of reasoning" (143) — in the same manner that the artists do in their compositions — that serves to rouse readers and viewers from their laziness and push them toward acting or learning (30).

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