INTRODUCTION

Inventions and Failures

In the 1870s, Martin Johnson Heade painted a self-destructing artwork, a landscape in a strangely entropic state. Propped on a studio easel, the painting—a panoramic scene representing a salt marsh—appears to be dripping water, draining itself of in one sense the wetland's vital life force, and in another the canvas's pictorial substance. A fitting emblem for the end of landscape, Heade's peculiar artwork marked a turning point in the history of the genre, a moment when the cultural ambitions of landscape painting in America were most in doubt.

The nineteenth-century art critic James Jackson Jarves once called landscape "a thoroughly American brand of painting."[1] Although not the first genre to receive national attention, it was certainly the first to develop a self-consciously American ideology. As the closest American correlate to European grand-manner history painting, the coming of age of the genre in the mid-nineteenth century was synonymous with the country's quest for international artistic recognition and cultural self-affirmation.

In the 1830s, the legendary early pioneer of landscape painting, Thomas Cole, began to champion the substitution of American wilderness for the Old World's vestiges of antiquity as the pictorial setting of moral and religious events. In the scenic vistas of the Hudson Valley and New England, he recognized "a natural majesty, and an unbounded capacity for improvement by art."[2] By the 1840s, Cole and his first disciple, Asher B. Durand, a founder of the National Academy of Design in New York, had established lasting conventions for a specifically American landscape painting—a naturalistic combination of dramatic, extended vistas and topographical and botanical details. Such strategies,

fashioned to raise landscape from its low rungs on the artistic hierarchy and transform it into an art form for higher expression, were quickly affirmed and disseminated by a coterie of New York artists now often identified as the Hudson River School.

This generation of painters, led by Frederic Edwin Church, John Frederick Kensett, and others, institutionalized a mode of landscape representation that profoundly transformed the American art world. Under their tutelage, landscape was recognized both within and outside of the United States as a uniquely national practice.[3] "Landscape," according to Jarves, was an art form "based upon the facts and tastes of the country and people. . . . It surpasses all others in popular favor, and may be said to have reached the dignity of a distinct school."[4] For the American art press, this burgeoning genre became a crowning cultural achievement. In 1853, *Knickerbocker* magazine reported that "landscape-painting has acquired in our country a dignity and character . . . which cannot be claimed by any other branch of the fine arts. . . . There can be no doubt that there is no more genuine and sincere admiration of landscape-painting in our country than for any other."[5] For Cole and his followers, landscape painting came to exemplify nationhood already materialized in American nature itself. Indeed, the prominence of landscape art constituted one element of a broader national investment in American land and nature. In the literary sphere, Transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau built a philosophy of life around the subjective and material experience of the natural world. In the sciences, naturalists and explorers turned a scrutinizing eye to the identification and representation of endemic American species.

The American reverence for land and its associated earthbound metaphors was ultimately political. At its height, the exaltation of landscape painting was coextensive with the celebration of American potential on the world stage. In 1854, the *Illustrated Magazine of Art* insisted that American landscapes expressed the essential character of the country's practically minded countrymen:

> Landscape painting, the only department in which we can hope to form a school, has been cultivated with true devotion. Here we may gain a proud eminence among the nations, and here alone. The character of our civilisation is too earnest and practical to foster imaginative tastes: the nearness of our past denies to the artist the mellowness and deep perspective of distance. But "the hills rock-ribbed," the course of noble rivers, the repose of lakes, and the climate peculiarly our own, these things . . . are entirely American.[6]

Identified with nationhood more generally, landscape painting came to embody for many viewers both the definition of the American self and the country's broader goals. The French critic Siegfried Bing would appraise landscape as the genre in which "American art affirms itself."[7] Americans viewed landscape as not only an arena for artistic achievement but also one for cultural communication. Its prominent characteristics were, according to one critic, "realism, vigor, enterprise, and freshness."[8] The ambition

of landscape's practitioners was unmatched by those of any other genre, for their art form was called upon to assume the mammoth task of reflecting and encouraging national progress. Before there was a "frontier thesis," there was a landscape thesis.[9]

LANDSCAPE'S PICTORIAL CONDITIONS

Landscape's rapid development and dramatic efflorescence canonized not just a collection of landmarks and natural sites but also a set of pictorial conventions that became steadfastly aligned with the genre's cultural mandate. Art historians have often considered mid-nineteenth-century landscape painting as a bifurcated undertaking inhabiting formally distinct visual modes—the "grand opera" and the "still small voice," as Barbara Novak memorably called them.[10] At one extreme, we find monumental works by Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and their followers (see fig. 2), a naturalistic development of Cole's allegorical canvases such as *The Course of Empire* (1833–36), a series that dramatizes the rise and fall of human civilization set within native scenery. On the other, we find the more picturesque and meditative approaches of artists like Sanford Robinson Gifford (fig. 3) and John Frederick Kensett, derived perhaps from such earlier practices as Asher B. Durand's plein-air oil sketches. Nationalist agendas have too often been aligned with the grand-manner format of landscape, with less dramatic pictures serving as a more innocent counterpoint. In light of new discoveries about the fluidity of artistic networks and the revision of earlier formalist readings, such assumptions are harder to maintain. Understanding these divergent landscape practices as allied enterprises is thus warranted now more than ever.

American landscape painting is often defined by its philosophical underpinnings—its metaphorical modes of address. Yet its prestige and meaning derived from an observable set of pictorial mechanisms, compositional strategies, and visual devices.[11] Mid-nineteenth-century artists and critics shared a common consciousness about the visual mechanics of landscape painting across the spectrum of stylistic practices, from the picturesque to the sublime. Landscape paintings, regardless of their grandeur, tended to satisfy three key visual conditions. Chief among these was what I call narrative accessibility, or the potential for a picture to encourage imagined traversal or inhabitation. Producing a desirable narrative condition depended on the inclusion of a firm ground for entry, whether that open pathway leads to heroic experience or quiet contemplation. Monumental landscapes like Bierstadt's crowd-pleasers shown during the era's popular exhibitions were often accompanied by printed pamphlets guiding beholders through the represented scene as if on a tour through real space.

These narratives, in turn, mirrored the experiences of the artists themselves, who were celebrated for their intrepid travels through supposedly untrammeled territory. Such fictitious itineraries often relied on the increasing visibility and navigability of the represented sites, which at the time of their depiction were often newly explored,

FIGURE 3
Sanford Robinson Gifford, *Morning on the Hudson, Haverstraw Bay*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 14½ × 40¼ in. (36.2 × 76.8 cm). Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1993.11. Photo: © Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago.

surveyed, or settled. Traversable spaces in painting were not limited to the imposing sites depicted in these typically oversize canvases calling for rugged adventure. Smaller, atmospheric artworks also aimed to be habitable, though on leisurely rather than heroic terms. In his series of essays "Letters on Landscape," which purport to teach a novice painter the essentials of the genre, Durand claimed that "the true landscape becomes a thing of more than outward beauty" if the artist allows the viewer to "look into the picture instead of on it." Painters, he advised, should "animate the canvas" in order to invite either repose in or movement "through the scene."[12] The narrative capacities of landscape were as much a compositional trope as a textual one, for routes of traversal and spaces for repose were story-making settings that facilitated, even authorized, the exploitation of land itself whether through resource extraction and cultural conquest, or tourism and development.

Just as central to landscape painting was the pictorial acknowledgment of land's economic potential. Not only did paintings have to be traversable and inhabitable, they were called upon to reinforce ties between land and capital through the inclusion of an economically minded gaze. Panoramic vistas, which Alan Wallach has described as the "panoptic mode" in reference to Thomas Cole's well-known commission *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836, fig. 4), were deliberately constructed to connect vision and power and assert ownership.[13] Not surprisingly, panoptic compositions became the predominant strategy for representing frontier landscapes during decades of rapid territorial expansion, serving to visually incorporate the American West as well as other unfamiliar terrains into economic

FIGURE 4
Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51½ × 76 in. (130.8 × 193 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908. Photo: © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

systems. Even more familiar Eastern vistas, like the New England shoreline, were economic landscapes, intertwined as they were with the growing tourism and real estate industries.[14] Artists themselves were especially cognizant of land values, whether as speculators themselves or through close ties with their landowning patrons. It is no coincidence that the English word "prospect" describes both a scenic viewpoint and an investor's parcel of land. American landscapists put both connotations of prospect on display when providing beholders with a stable, unobstructed viewing position mimicking that of the surveyor. Economic potential and narrative accessibility mutually reinforced each other, simulating, respectively, optical and tactile modes of spatial encounter.

A third visual condition of midcentury landscapes involved the maintenance of apparent objectivity in portrayals of nature. Intense naturalism based in empirical observation dominated many forms of painting into the Civil War period, but in landscape, it was particularly crucial. Here I use "objectivity" in a nineteenth-century sense. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown, objectivity in this period was mechanical in orientation, driven by a desire to visualize nature in its individuality and specificity, which in turn suppressed the idealizing and interpretive impulses of the observer.[15] This epistemological condition, and the practices that it encouraged, were as integral to

landscape painting as they were to scientific study. In fact, scientific reference was favored in landscape painting, often prompting artists to integrate the visual modes of natural history into their practices. During sketching excursions, painters eagerly studied not just broad vistas but also such minutiae as botanical specimens and geological striations. Just as vigorous and extensive travels were celebrated undertakings among mid-century landscapists, so too were accurate observation and careful fieldwork. Very often, landscape painters were amateur scientists in their own right.

Scientific knowledge played distinct roles for landscapists in the studio. Some artists channeled their embrace of objectivity into highly specific sets of foreground objects and figures, which they integrated into larger compositions. Others made carefully observed fragments of nature the subject of their painting through virtuosic delineations of a rock surface or a patch of moss. The objectivity favored by landscapists was, however, only *apparent*, for it rarely if ever led to accurate transcriptions of views in their entirety. Rather, objectivity enhanced the overall truth value of a scene, a quality that helped landscape art meet allied goals. Lodged in a painting's highly finished scientific details was the myth that landscape could deliver the viewer into real space, thereby enabling experiences such as heroic conquest, quiet occupation, or surveying ownership to unfold.

To be sure, not all American landscapists subscribed to these aims during the decades of their genre's rise, particularly since this triad of objectives was not explicitly named as such in period discourse. Nevertheless, principles of narrative accessibility, economic potential, and apparent objectivity constituted key preoccupations guiding the material making and cultural consumption of landscape in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. While not all painters were necessarily conscious of the economic and narrative underpinnings of their pictorial choices, their work nevertheless reinforced them by the very fact of its adherence to convention. While such pictorial conventions were not necessarily unique to American landscape painting (which, after all, developed in response to European art), identifying them is key to understanding the unique historical pressures that led to their eventual degradation and revision.

DOOMED TO FAIL

The end of landscape was in many ways written into its rise. The function of nineteenth-century landscape painting was intimately tied to its pictorial language, making artworks highly susceptible to misreading and mistranslation. The political charge of landscape conventions emerged as problematic as early as the 1850s. As Angela Miller has argued, regionalist and sectionalist tensions threatening landscape's ideological formation built contradictions into the very visual structure of pictures. Although understood as a "national" school, landscape painting was a cosmopolitan enterprise rooted in the Northeast, particularly New York. As such, local sites of historical significance in New England and the mid-Atlantic were regularly called upon to serve as national symbols. Even paintings that successfully bolstered nationalism pictorially embedded the fragility of their