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Steven Adams, *Landscape Painting in Revolutionary France: Liberty's Embrace*. New York: Routledge, 2019. 172 pp. 42 b/w illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780415346863; \$48.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781315229430.

Reviewed by Kelly Presutti, Cornell University.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre defined spatiality as encompassing “perceived,” “conceived” and “lived” space. None of these, of course, are readily available in the historic record, making spatiality an elusive subject for scholarly study. But Lefebvre also pointed to the importance of discursive spaces, what he termed “representations of space” and “representational spaces.”<sup>[1]</sup> Seizing upon the possibilities Lefebvre introduced, Steven Adams uses French Revolutionary landscapes to recover the perceived, conceived and lived spatialities of the past.

*Landscape Painting in Revolutionary France: Liberty's Embrace* reopens a discussion around what Adams terms “an expanded form” of landscape (p. 8), analyzing traditional landscape paintings alongside literary pamphlets, theatrical productions, the staging of revolutionary festivals, and popular entertainments like the diorama and panorama, to tell a new history of the political stakes of landscape in Revolutionary France. Throughout the book, Adams argues for a connection between spatial politics and practices of representation, emphasizing “pictures that have a purpose” (p. 126). He ties pictures of places to articulations of power and consequently it is not Lefebvre, but Foucault who drives Adams's inquiry, providing not only a model of spatial power but also one of history as division, dispersal and difference. Adams's text is divided neatly along political regimes, though those divides prove to be more porous and permeable than might usually be assumed.

One of the challenges that inheres in such a history is the lack of clear stylistic differences between landscapes painted before and after the events of 1789. Landscape painting, constrained by generic conventions, could not adapt quite as rapidly as the pace of political change demanded, prompting larger questions about how to communicate new ideas and experiences when saddled with the tools and media of a previous epoch. Here Adams's conclusions echo Anthony Vidler's analysis of architectural voids and Richard Taws's turn to ephemera as ways of identifying traces of revolutionary change.<sup>[2]</sup> In his work, Adams suggests images that look the same might have new significance given the changing politics of place. A topographic view of Switzerland (not a specific one, but the idea of one) could perhaps be read as a reference to political liberty in the post-Revolutionary climate. One of Adams's main contributions is demonstrating where and how landscape artists began to display specific and recognizable places—a place that could be identified as Switzerland, for example—as opposed to generic ideals. This shift had repercussions across the

nineteenth century that extended beyond conceptions of spatiality and enabled art to comment on particular territorial politics.

Adams also contributes to a dialogue around the importance of seemingly minor genres to the massive social and political reconfigurations prompted by the French Revolution and its aftermath. He follows on Amy Freund's study of portraiture in reassessing the Revolutionary significance of previously neglected modes of representation, finding the politics of pictures whose neutrality has for too long been taken for granted.<sup>[3]</sup> French landscapes, while the subject of countless exhibitions and texts dedicated to Impressionism, have not been given the kind of thoroughgoing social critique that historians of British landscapes launched in the 1980s (including work by John Barrell, Ann Bermingham, David Solkin and others).<sup>[4]</sup> The popularity of Impressionism poses a peculiar burden, dominating the field of view to such an extent that lesser-known landscapists have gone all but unseen (with some exceptions for artists like Courbet and the Barbizon school, including Adams's previous text on the subject).<sup>[5]</sup> Early in the book, Adams reiterates prevailing ideas about the hierarchy of genres to state "arguably the art with the least purpose was landscape" (p. 11) and yet the subsequent chapters go on to reveal just the opposite, that landscape actually had a critical role to play in navigating the new spatial possibilities of a nation in upheaval.

In the first chapter, Adams addresses what the revolution did *not* change, or at least what innovations in landscape predated it. His primary evidence is not a particular painting but instead an entry on landscape from a dictionary published in 1788 by the academician, poet, garden designer and engraver Claude-Henri Watelet. One of Adams's main points is that there is some consistency and repetition in practices of landscape despite the constant disruption of the Revolutionary period, and the dictionary supports this interpretation. When it was revised in 1791, few of its major principles changed. Watelet drew on the pastoral pleasures of his own garden estate when writing the entry, providing a theoretical basis for a category of representation that had received limited prior attention. Yet he also emphasized classicizing references to the past. Watelet's dictionary entry foregrounds landscape's capacity to be simultaneously backwards-looking and ever-present, to be both referential and immersive. This temporal aspect sets up Adams's subsequent arguments regarding landscape's ability to engage historical change.

Adams notes in concluding his first chapter that despite aspects of continuity, the Revolution "had a seismic effect on landscape painting," and he explores these effects in the second chapter (p. 39). He tracks the spatial configuration of revolutionary festivals, building on Mona Ozouf's observations regarding the role of space in articulating political order.<sup>[6]</sup> He follows these observations into the domain of painting, relying largely on literal representations of festivals. Painters struggled to capture the expansive federative spatiality of festivals on the limited superficiality of a canvas, resulting in works that, in Adams's words, pushed "established cultural categories to their limits" (p. 54). At the same time, a collapse in patronage meant there was even less possibility for consolidating revolutionary spatiality in visual terms. It's here that Adams introduces his definition of modernity: "there were too many landscape paintings, too many landscape painters and nothing specific to do with them... In some respects, we have an early intimation of modernity in which landscapes became largely aestheticized productions without any specific ideological purpose" (p. 58). This foreshadows Adams's later conclusions about the "liberty" of art post-1830, but it also seems out of step with increasing critiques of an idea of modern art as free of ideological burden.

Soon, however, France's "too many landscape painters" would have something to do, as a new theory of landscape launched renewed academic aspirations. In 1799, the academician Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes introduced the principles of *paysage historique* in a widely-published treatise.<sup>[7]</sup> Historical landscape painting would draw moral lessons and aesthetic inspiration from the ancients. Painting the distant past allowed artists to conveniently sidestep the political morass of the present, a theme Adams develops further in his subsequent chapter. But as Adams himself acknowledges, this is only part of what Valenciennes set out to do in his treatise. In what Adams terms the "straightforward" first half of the text (p. 7), Valenciennes outlined practical techniques for *en plein air* study—techniques that required painters to physically encounter the real space of France in much the same way cartographers undertaking the ongoing cadastral project were sizing up its territory. Adams quickly dismisses this pragmatic advice in favor of a discussion of Valenciennes's almost impossibly ambitious program to resurrect "the invisible past" (p. 65). In so doing, Adams overlooks an opportunity to approach the lived space of artists experiencing the landscape and to understand the process of making a picture as having its own spatiality, one less easily regulated and subject to either state or market demands.

Adams's third chapter addresses the "totalizing spatiality that became the trademark of Bonaparte's administration" (p. 72). The administration telegraphed its desires in the purchase and commission of particular landscapes, especially military landscapes and those featuring sites that had been important in Napoleon's campaigns. Often accompanied by textual explanations, these paintings resulted in what Adams calls "tendentious landscapes" (p. 77), a term that stresses what Adams sees as the agential possibilities of the genre. Even landscapes not explicitly featuring the emperor or his troops could take on a degree of implied pacification, and here Adams comes to an important point about how landscapes signified in this period. He points to the reverberation within the picture of what was happening "off-stage," reinserting landscape art into a nexus of historical places and events. The effectiveness of these landscapes transformed the viewer of the painting into what Adams terms "an Imperial avatar on a European stage" (p. 91).

As power shifted once again with the fall of Napoleon so did, in Adams's argument, conceptions of space. The Restoration's erasure of Napoleonic symbolism produced an absence sustained by a policy of *l'oubli*. Instead of reading the traces of loss in the landscape, a resurgence of historic interest allowed artists and viewers to skip over the present in favor of the past. This sentimental historicism shone in projects like the *Voyages pittoresques*.<sup>[8]</sup> It is significant, for Adams, that the *Voyages pittoresques* combined image and text, as what they offer is a sort of vision deferred or restored. This claim hinges on the inclusion of, for example, a clutch of small figures reading a guide, rather than looking directly at the site in Eugène Ciceri's *The Foundations of the Castle of Robert le Diable* from the Normandy volume.

One of the *Voyages pittoresques's* famous contributors, Jacques-Louis Daguerre, was responsible for the invention of the diorama (in addition to the daguerreotype that bears his name). Adams uses a comparison of the panorama and the diorama to link the "sublimated" relationship to the past he saw in the *Voyages pittoresques* with the total immersion of the diorama. He nuances prior accounts of spectacles of vision (including work by Jonathan Crary), by distinguishing between the two forms and their effect on the viewer.<sup>[9]</sup> Reading contemporary responses to the diorama, Adams concludes that, while the fixed perspective of the panorama allowed the viewer to remain detached, the movement and light of the diorama meant "the viewer is deprived of the chance to disrupt the mechanics of seeing and thereby becomes wholly assimilated into the spectacle,

typically a space removed from the everyday world” (p. 112). We are reminded of those first witnesses to the Lumière brothers’ invention, recoiling as a train hurtled towards them. For Adams, this escapism is a natural response to *l’oubli*, a compensatory gesture to suture over the wounds of the recent past.

Landscape never found a clear place within the French academic tradition, despite some support for the “historical landscape” category Valenciennes had articulated early in the century. That does not mean, however, that landscapes were not being made. Adams ends his book with a focus on consumption, looking to sale catalogues, auction records and art dealers’ advertisements. As a commodity, landscape becomes, for Adams, purposeless in the Kantian sense. Tied to Benjaminian passages and Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of the legitimation of cultural products, “art, like so many other commodities, became a means of absorbing surplus capital” (p. 125). The result, according to Adams, was pure painterly autonomy, work that was political only in its freedom from politics. It is odd, following such a creative set of readings of the ways landscapes speak, directly and indirectly, on- and off-stage, to silence them so thoroughly at the end. Adams’s postscript marks 1830 as a break, after which art left behind its direct engagement with politics to take on the “essentially modern problem...one in which the unfettered imagination of the painter is seen as the best guarantor of political liberty” (p. 134). He hedges his conclusions by finding intimations of this liberty earlier in the century, but understands 1830 as a retroactive cultural construction claimed in the service of a free and modern art.

Adams moves his narrative forward with the interjection of questions that most commonly use the interrogator “how”: “How did new conceptions of space find their way into landscape painting?” (p. 52); “How was the genre reconfigured in the first years of the nineteenth century and how were the politics of the Consulate and Empire implicated within it?” (p. 74); “How did Sèvres’ porcelain articulate Imperial power?” (p. 92), and so on. He answers these questions with a truly stunning array of primary and secondary sources, combining visual and textual evidence to produce clear accounts of distinctly shifting spatial practices. This tactic gives the book a certain propulsive energy, a hurtling forward into the modernist present with which Adams ends. But adding some “whys” to the book’s course might have slowed things down and allowed more accounting of process as opposed to result. Why was landscape representation so important in navigating this moment? What made it so useful to those in power, and to those subject to drastic shifts in modes of governance? In what ways were the spatialities of represented landscapes intersecting with changes on the ground, where boundaries were being redrawn and administrative orders remapped? Adams brings in a raft of understudied and forgotten image-makers, and his work foregrounds what is to be gained by looking beyond the art historical mainstays. Future studies might take Adams’s expanded landscapes still further, looking particularly to cartographic materials to further assess landscape painting’s intersection with other spatial practices.

Adams acknowledges the disconnect between some of the paintings he cites and what he wants to conclude about them, like the unmistakable specificity of historic landscapes that could not have been done without some study of the natural world (rather than wholly relying on the distant past Adams claims they resurrect). “But *practice* is not the point” he writes, declaring his allegiance to theories of landscape that made it legible for its constituents and for the historian (p. 120). Taken, then, as a book about historical theories of landscape as a way of charting otherwise intangible spatialities, Adams’s work is a valuable contribution to scholarship on the

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French Revolution and on landscape as marker of how historic events and shifts in power register on the ground in ways both real and symbolic.

## NOTES

[1] Henri Lefebvre, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 33.

[2] Anthony Vidler, "Researching Revolutionary Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44/4 (August 1991): 206-210; Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional* (University Park, MD: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

[3] Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (University Park, MD: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

[4] Classic texts in this genre include John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987); David Solkin, *Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1982).

[5] Steven Adams, *The Barbizon School and the Origins of Impressionism* (London: Phaidon, 1994).

[6] Mona Ozouf, tr. Alan Sheridan, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); originally published as *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

[7] Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, *Éléments de perspective pratique* (Paris: Desenne, Duprat, 1799).

[8] Charles Nodier, Isidorek-Justin\_Séverin Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux, *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, 18 vols. (Paris, 1820-78).

[9] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).

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