

Landscape as Art and Resource

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Purpose of Grant

This Professional Development Grant funded a trip to Amsterdam, where I presented a paper entitled “Landscape as Art and Resource” at the biennial conference of the International Big History Association (IBHA). Big history is a relatively new historiographical method that considers history on broad scales of time and space. I considered this project very important because I believe big history can make a valuable contribution to art history, and vice versa. Big history can connect art history to other disciplines by broadening its heretofore very narrow scope, and art history, with its insight into human creativity, can help give big history a purpose and direction, a point I argued in an article I published in *Origins*, the IBHA’s journal/newsletter, in July 2015. I felt that my presence at this year’s conference was essential, as I was the only art historian at the 2014 IBHA Conference.

Review of the Professional Development Opportunity

My paper searched for the ultimate source of humans’ aesthetic taste in landscape as reflected in landscape design, architecture, and painting. I gave an overview of the history of landscape art, with roughly equal attention paid to commonalities in landscape aesthetics across cultures, which can be traced back to aspects of human evolution, and differences, which can be attributed to geographic factors and the uneven distribution of resources around the planet. My overarching thesis was that a culture’s use of landscape in art reflects its extraction of resources from the land; I believe that an artist uses the land as a resource just as much as a farmer or a miner, but such ethical implications of landscape art have not been considered beyond their immediate social and political context.

My research, as always with big history, was interdisciplinary. I drew on art-historical literature to find examples of artists and artworks that could serve as useful case studies (and I

made a Powerpoint with many of these works for my talk). I also drew on the work of geographers, such as Denis Cosgrove and Jay Appleton, whose research has focused on the cultural construction of landscape. And I also read some fascinating psychological studies in which subjects were asked about their landscape tastes.

I flew to Amsterdam from Little Rock on July 12. The conference began on July 14, I presented my paper on July 15, and I returned to Arkansas on July 17. I attended all but one day of the conference.

Summary of the Experience

Because of my article in *Origins*, I went into this conference much more well-known than I came out of the last one. I had a positive experience interacting with other conference attendees. I am also pleased to say that I was not the only attendee presenting on the history of art, though I believe I was still the only one present with an art history degree.

I presented in front of a small, but enthusiastic and supportive audience. The most valuable contribution the audience made was suggesting other artists and works I might consider in my research going forward. The biggest challenge I faced in writing this paper is one often faced by big historians: how to present the entire history of landscape art in twenty minutes. By necessity, I had to be selective. But if I decide to take this research further, perhaps for a publication in the IBHA's new journal, due to launch in January, I will have the luxury of writing at greater length and using more examples.

Conclusion

While I would still need to do much more research to shape this conference paper into a publishable article, I am encouraged by the positive response. I believe my participation in big

history conferences in the future will continue to be crucial, and the new IBHA journal can provide me with a venue for regular publication in the future.

The research I did for this paper will also help with a book I am working on about the history of the upstate New York landscape. While this book would not constitute big history, the sources I consulted for this conference paper provide valuable theoretical background for my ongoing research on landscape art and cultural history.