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Early Historic Appreciation of Landscapes, Their Value and the Contribution of Ansel Adam's Photographic Art to Landscape and Nature Conservation

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Abstract

Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* published in 1690 was the first to present the modern meaning of the term *paysage* as the "aspect of a country, the territory that extends within sight". The first landscape paintings were made in Flanders in the 15th century and depicted views of the countryside. Landscape painting of the sea and the mountains only became generalized in the 18th century, with forests and deserts becoming popular subject in the century that followed. In the 20th century, geography and ecology appropriated the meaning of landscape which then became the figuration of the biosphere integrated into a distinct territory compartment. The idea of an intrinsic value of wilderness and wild landscapes is quite recent and is based on the idea that all organisms must be protected and that the spiritual bonds that link human beings to the wild are indispensable to their mental health. Through an analysis of Ansel Adams's letters, I hypothesize that his love for nature and his perception of how urgent it was to preserve the wilderness were the catalyst and foundation of his photographic process. Following Adams's thinking, I propose here that landscape photography can be actively involved in nature conservation and wilderness preservation.

Keywords: landscape photography, wilderness, Ansel Adams, conservationism

1. Introduction

Ansel Adams (1902–1984), one of the founders of modern landscape photography, was also a passionate for wilderness and activist for nature conservation, and these attitudes were, according to my interpretation of his letters and artistic work, the catalyst and foundation of his process of photographic development. In order to ground this hypothesis, it is worth discussing some historical issues such as the origin of the term landscape, which were the first pictorial representations of landscapes (in the modern sense of the territory that can be encompassed by a single glance from a privileged point of view), and how these representations evolved from the fourteenth-century to the present. It is also important to discuss how to assign a value to a landscape and to wilderness, and the importance of nature conservation for the future of mankind. The discussion of these topics, which follows, allowed to substantiate the interpretative hypothesis enunciated above and to conclude, in more general terms, that landscape photography can be a memory tool for wilderness and nature conservation.

2. The Origin and Multiple Meanings of the Term Landscape

With its roots in the Latin word *pagus*, meaning a village, an area outside of a city, the countryside, or rural community, the French word *paysage* (*paisage*) appears for the first time in 1549 as an entry in the French-Latin dictionary of the lexicographer and printer Robert Estienne (c.1503–1559), and contained the usage information, "common name among painters" (Estienne, 1549, p. 428). This concept was adopted again in later 17th-century dictionaries, such as the Aimar de Ranconnet (-1559) Treasury of the French Language, revised and expanded by the diplomat and philologist Jean Nicot (1530–1604) (Aimar de Ranconnet, 1606, p. 453), and the French

Dictionary of the grammarian and lexicographer César-Pierre Richelet (1626-1698) (Richelet, 1680, p. 111[1]). In addition to the usual definition ("painting depicting views of houses or the countryside"), Antoine Furetière's (1619-1688) Universal French Dictionary published in 1690 included for the first time another meaning for *paisage* — an "aspect of a country, the territory that extends within sight" (Furetière, 1690), a modern concept that would become popular from the 18th century onwards. In the German language, the term *landschaft*, meaning homeland, province, has existed since the 8th century. In the 16th century, the Latin term *pagus* was translated into German by *ein dorff*, a village. The word *landschaft* meant not only the province but also its pictorial representation (Franceschi, 1997). In the 16th century, the Flemish word *lantschap* (or *landtschap*) meant the province, the territory and the climate (and was translated into Latin by *regius*, *terra*, *orbis*, *diocesis* and *clima*). Flemish mathematician, philosopher and cartographer Gemma Frisius (1508–1555) used the word *lantschap* to designate the territories he describes in his work *Cosmographie, oft Beschrijuinghe der geheelder werelt van Petrus Apianus*, an annotated translation of Petrus Apianus (1495–1552) *Cosmographicus liber*, first published in Antwerp in 1545. Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598), Flemish cartographer and geographer, and cosmographer to King Philip II of Spain, named regional maps as *besondere lantaschappen* ("special landscapes") in the Dutch edition of his work *Theatrum orbis terrarum*. This concept of landscape as a large objective space of existence that can be mapped, a landscape of the world visible on the surface of the Earth, is not yet the formula that would become more frequent from the 18th century onwards — the territory that can be encompassed by a single glance, from a privileged point of view (Besse, 2006, pp. 20–21), which, as already pointed out, is defined in Furetière's Dictionary. In the English language, the term *landscape* was first recorded in the 17th century in the compound form *land-scape*. The word *landscape* only appears in 1755, with a reference to the Flemish word *landtschape*, meaning a region and its pictorial representation (Franceschi, 1997).

The first landscape drawings appear in the fourteenth-century in herbals[2] and, in the following century, in agricultural calendars (Pächt, 1991). The first landscape paintings were created in Flanders in the 15th century, notably by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441). It was with Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569), a Flemish painter and engraver, that landscape drawing was definitively established as a type of pictorial representation. In the 1550s, returning to Antwerp from Italy, Bruegel was commissioned by the painter, engraver and publisher Hieronymus Cock (1518–1570) to make drawings for two series of prints — *The Great Landscapes* and *The Small Landscapes*, in which small personages, at work or at leisure, are placed in imaginary panoramic landscapes, seen from a high point, and depicting mountains, paths, lowlands, rivers, sea, villages, water, houses, palaces, and animals. In some of these landscapes[3], Bruegel drew individuals, with their backs turned, in an attitude of looking the landscape he had painted. The idea that emerges is that it is necessary to be calmly watching a landscape to appreciate it. To see nature as a landscape it is necessary to contemplate it freely. There seems to be an aesthetic pleasure linked to the pure contemplation of nature contained in a landscape, suggesting that there is a relationship between this modern representation of landscape and the development of an aesthetic awareness of nature. *The Great Landscapes* was engraved and published in 1555–1556 and *The Small Landscapes* in 1559.

A few years later, between 1561 and 1569, the Flemish painter and tireless traveler Joris Hoefnagel (1542–c.1600), traveling through France, Spain (a country where he stayed the longest), Germany and England, and later in 1578, in the company of the cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) traveling through Italy, made a series of drawings that would later be published in volumes III and V of *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, the most complete collection of panoramic views of cities. The texts in Latin that accompany the engravings were written by Georg Braun (1541–1622), canon of the cathedral of Colonia, the main promoter and general coordinator of *Civitates*.

The work was published in six volumes in 1572, 1575, 1581, 1588, 1598 and 1617, and later reprinted and reissued by various publishers in different countries. In Volume III (Braun et al., 1599, p. 52), a drawing of the city of Tivoli[4] (then also known as *Tiburnum*), sighted on February 1, 1578 is presented. In the foreground, we see two travellers with their sticks and a third person who seems to be communicating with them. The following

[1] "It is a painting that represents a fraction of the countryside". For landscaper (paisagiste), the dictionary (p. 111) indicates that he is a painter who only works on landscapes.

[2] A herbal is a book with the description of the most important plants at the time, their morphology, their vernacular, Latin and Greek names, and their food and medicinal properties and uses. Some herbals also include descriptions of minerals and animal products. Some herbals contained drawings of the plants and animals described. Despite the knowledge of herbals from the Egyptian civilization, the first important herbal was the work De Materia Medica by Dioscorides, originally written in the first century AD, which had a very large number of editions and translations from the 16th century onwards. The 16th and 17th centuries were the golden age of herbals.

[3] As shown in The Great Landscapes, Soldiers at Rest (Milites Requiescentes), Travelers on the Road to Emmaus (Evntes in Emavs), Belgian Chariot (Plavstrum Belgicvm), Peasant Worries, and in The Small Landscapes, numbers #13 and #22.

[4] The commune currently has around 50,000 inhabitants and belongs to the metropolitan area of Rome.

page presents the description and drawing of the city of Velletri[1] (then known as *Velitrae* or *Biltri*). Outside the walls, in an intermediate plane, we see a farmer plough the land and a shepherd with a flock (they appear to be sheep) and, in the foreground, two travelers talking, accompanied by three pack animals. A little further on (p. 55), we can see a drawing of the gulf and the city of Gaeta[2] (then *Caieta*) with two personages in the foreground, talking, one of them pointing with his arm to something in the distance. On page 57 we find two drawings of the lake of Agnano, a lake of the homonymous volcano that would be drained and dry up in the 19th century. In the foreground, the same two people are in conversation, one with his arm outstretched pointing into the distance, which the caption tells us are Hoefnagel and Ortelius themselves.

The authors' representation in their own drawings of the panoramic views of cities they observe, convey the idea that they are talking about what they are seeing and gives these representations a status of their own, something that must be seen, appreciated, contemplated, and studied (Besse, 2006, p. 41).

Louis, *Chevalier* de Jaucourt (1704–1779)[3], in the dictionary entry "Paysage" of the monumental *Encyclopédie* (Jaucourt, 1765, p. 212) considered only the original concept — landscape "is a kind of painting that represents the countryside and the objects found in it". For painting, the landscape was one of the most "rich, pleasant and fruitful" themes. In painting, the landscape could be treated in the "heroic" or "pastoral and country" style. In the heroic style, "wonderful" views of temples, ancient tombs, houses with "superb" architecture could be presented, while in the country style nature should be presented in a way that was "simple, without artifice", by, for example, depicting shepherds with their flocks, solitary people meditating on top of rocks or in the middle of forests, meadows, or viewed in the distance. In landscape paintings, "uncultivated and uninhabited places", and "deserts without people" were sometimes represented, but, for the Chevalier de Jaucourt, these representations only served to "stir emotions in moments of melancholy". The "intelligent" painters always used different characters in landscape painting "whose action was able to stir our emotions and therefore draw us in"[4]. In landscape paintings, people portrayed in a pensive attitude were represented with the intention "to make us think". The next entry in the encyclopaedia is dedicated to Landscape Painting ("Paysagiste, peinture"; Jaucourt, 1765, pp. 212–213), in which Jaucourt highlights the Italian, Flemish and Dutch schools, represented by the masters[5], Matthijs Bril (1550–1583), Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), Jan Brueghel the Younger (c.1568–1625), Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), Claude Lorrain (c.1600–1682), Pier Francesco Mola (1612–1666), Francesco Francesco Maria Borzone (1625–1679), Johannes Vermeer van Delft (1632–1675), Lucas van Uden (1595–1673), Nicolaes Berchem (1620–1683), Bartholomeus Breenbergh (c.1598–1657), Jan Griffier (1652–1718), Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594–1667), Paulus Potter (1625–1654), Jacob Ruisdael (c.1628–1682), Philips Wouwerman (1619–1668), Herman Saftleven (1609–1685). With regard to the English school, landscape paintings "are in fashion" and "are well paid", so that this kind of painting is "cultivated with great success". Despite his opinion that there were not many Flemish landscape painters of a higher quality than the English, the author of this dictionary entry does not mention any names.

Only in the 18th century did landscape painting of the sea and the mountain become generalized, and in the following century, that of the forest and the desert (Roger, 1997).

The landscape, a historical and essentially aesthetic invention, was, until the end of the 19th century, rich, pleasant, delicious, or, conversely, hideous, hostile. In the 20th century, geography and ecology "phagocytized" the landscape (Roger, 1997; Alves de Araújo, 2022, p. 49). The term now means the figuration of the biosphere, resulting from the complex action of man and all living beings (plants, animals and microorganisms) in balance with physical environmental factors — the set of elements that, integrated into a territorial compartment, characterize and distinguish it from other compartments (Alves de Araújo, 2022, p. 49).

Thus, we speak of *wild* or *primitive landscapes* — in which man has not intervened, of *natural landscapes* — in which human intervention has long created a stable equilibrium with ecological factors, and of *artificial landscapes* — in which human intervention results in a permanent imbalance (Caldeira Cabral, 1973). Adapting to new contexts, today we talk about *urban landscapes* and *industrial landscapes*.

3. On the Intrinsic and Irreplaceable Value of Wilderness

What value does a landscape have? In economic terms, commodities have a value which is, at least in part, conferred by the labour embodied in their manufacture or mechanical production. In principle, work transmits

[1] The commune currently has around 50,000 inhabitants and belongs to the metropolitan area of Rome.

[2] The commune currently has around 20,000 inhabitants and belongs to the Latina province of Lazio, in southern Italy.

[3] Medical doctor, he would be one of the main editors of the Encyclopédie in economic and literary subjects, in medicine and politics. He wrote a total of 17,000 entries, which he signed as "D. J.". He was the most verbose of encyclopedists!

[4] It is interesting that the painters mentioned by the Chevalier de Jaucourt in his landscape paintings almost always included people and/or animals. One of the exceptions is Jacob Ruisdael (c.1628–1682).

[5] Author's order of painters in the text, which is not chronological, has been followed here.

value to the merchandise it produces. On the other hand, there is another type of value of a commodity — its market value, the value at which it can be currently transacted, this not being a direct function of the amount of work incorporated, but rather the result of a negotiable value in a logical market and therefore variable over time and seasons (Barata, 2022).

Is it possible to assign a value to a landscape? If this value is dependent on the amount of work spent in the development and transformation of this landscape, then a primitive, wild landscape would have no value and an urban landscape the maximum value, an approach that seems unreasonable and inappropriate.

A far better approach is to consider the intrinsically ecological value of a landscape, which depends, for example, on the amount of water that the ecosystems inserted in it are able to retain, the amount of carbon dioxide that they are able to remove from the atmosphere, the amount of pollutants that can degrade.

Does the land belong to anyone? For some, the land only belongs to itself, it has an intrinsic value, independent of its usefulness to man, and therefore it is necessary to protect it as it is. This intrinsic value is not easy to define and its assessment has evolved over time. The promoters of the first National Parks in the USA in the 19th century[1] intended to preserve the testimony of the grandiose landscapes of the American nation. This wilderness had a very precise function in building the American imagination and in legitimizing the expansion of the frontier: to make the greatest possible number of people see the distinctive character of American nature and, consequently, of the people who had received the job to take care of it. This position was, in a way, a reply to the positions taken in Europe which considered the USA as culturally inferior to the Old Continent. In response, Americans turned to the splendours of their magnificent landscapes — the natural wonders of the West offered indisputable evidence of American non-inferiority. The USA landscape was regarded as uniquely American in that it was a pristine paradise akin to the Garden of Eden. While in Europe the maximum exponent of culture was seen in monuments, architecture and classical ruins, in the USA it was considered that their "ancient monuments" were the primitive forests, the great mountains, the pristine lakes, and the imposing waterfalls. Furthermore, while in Europe, it was considered that an education in history and literature was necessary to appreciate landscape painting, in the USA it was understood that the landscape, as an artistic matter, was "democratic", and that it only demanded from the painter and the public an individual, deeply felt experience of the beauty and drama of nature (Weber, 2002, p. 65; Berleant, 2011, p. 379).

The idea of a true intrinsic value of wilderness is quite recent (Descola, 2008), and is based on the idea that all organisms must be protected, not just those that are in some way useful to man. The intrinsic and irreplaceable value of all the organisms that live on Earth, organized into ecosystems in which everyone and everything is interdependent, was highlighted by the Catholic Church, through the voice of Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*: it is not enough to think of the different species only as possible exploitable resources, forgetting that they have a value in themselves. It might upset us to learn of the extinction of a mammal or a bird, due to its greater visibility, but for the proper functioning of ecosystems, fungi, algae, worms, small insects, reptiles and the variety myriad of micro-organisms, are all needed[2].

The human species is the result of natural evolution not only in its anatomical and physiological conformation, but also in its way of being and psychic structure. It is necessary to draw attention to the risks involved in disrupting the spiritual bonds that link human beings to nature and the wilderness (Alves de Araújo, 2022, p. 268).

4. Linking Ansel Adams's Love for Nature, Wilderness and Conservationism to Landscape Photography

In the context of photographic art of the twentieth-century, landscape photography was a genre cultivated by a relatively limited number of photographers. Of these, Ansel Adams (1902–1984) holds a prominent position. His initial artistic training was musical, as a pianist. His meeting with the photographer Paul Strand (1890–1976) in 1930 prompted him to dedicate himself fully to photography, relegating music to second plane. In 1932, together with photographers Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976), John Paul Edwards (1884–1968), Sonya Noskowiak (1900–1975), Henry Swift (1891–1962), Williard van Dyke (1906–1986) and Edward Henry Weston (1886–1958), Adams founded the "f/64 Group", headquartered in San Francisco. These photographers used very small lens apertures (hence their name) to obtain great depth of field and maximum detail and sharpness. They also resorted a lot to close-ups of isolated objects, an approximation well represented by Ansel Adams' photograph *Rose on driftwood*, dated 1933. In 1941, Ansel Adams developed and published the *zone system*, a method for calculating exposure and development times that allow the best grey grading. A few years later, in 1946, he founded the Department of Photography at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. In 1962

[1] The first USA National Parks were Yellostone (1872), Mackinac National Park (1875), Rock Creek Park, and Sequoia and Yosemite (1890).

[2] Encyclical Letter *Laudato si* of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home (24 May 2015), #33 and #34. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

he retired to Carmel Highlands. A significant part of his photographic work, as well as his civic and environmental commitment, was devoted to USA Natural Parks, to which he dedicated more than two dozen publications (Bieger-Thielemann, 2018, pp. 16–19). On the multiple aspects of photographic technique, his published three-volume work is regarded by many as essential: *The Camera* (Volume 1), *The Negative* (Volume 2) and *The Print* (Volume 3).

Ansel Adams' photographic work is well known, but his love for wilderness and his dedication to nature conservation may be unknown to some. Through an analysis of his private letters (Alinder & Stillman, 1988), I hypothesize here that Ansel Adams' love for nature and his perception of the urgency for wilderness preservation were the catalyst and foundation of his process of photographic development.

His visit to Yosemite in 1916 was probably the spark that detonated his enchantment for the wilderness. In 1919, Adams joined the Sierra Club, an environmental organization that still exists today. It was during the 1930s that he began to present his photographs in the cause of conservationism. There were 28 National Parks in the USA in the 1940s, and Ansel Adams photographed them all except the Everglades in Florida. For his preservation efforts, he was awarded the USA's highest civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter in 1980.

In a letter written in San Francisco to David Hunter McAlpin (1897–1989), dated February 3, 1941, Ansel Adams expressed his love towards all elements of nature, both inanimate and living. For him, the entire world was full of life — rocks, and everything that grows. He could not look at a patch of grass or a bit of soil without sensing their inner vitality. He felt the same way about mountains, fractions of the ocean, and even saw greatness in old wood (Alinder & Stillman, 1988, pp. 124–128). On June 1, 1957, in a letter to photographer and activist George Ballis (1925–2010), Ansel Adams expressed his fear for the destruction of nature and wilderness being caused by the spiralling exploitation of limited natural resources which could not support such exponential consumption for long. He had come to believe that roads in the forest constituted the most severe single threat. He wrote that in the previous two decades, there had been a sharp increase in the use and abuse of land, and feared that if this trend persisted that the wilderness could simply vanish in the very near future. He also found it hard to communicate to people in general that what the wilderness has to offer cannot be assigned a material value, that it was precisely those quintessential yet indefinable elements that sustained his dedication to preserving the wilderness, a vast natural resource that could be ruined by what ordinarily appear to be completely harmless developments (Alinder & Stillman, 1988, p. 243). The "Wilderness Act", approved on September 3, 1964, created the legal definition of wilderness in the USA, and protected 37,000 km² of federal land. The legislation begins assertively: "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness". The urgency and need of this legislation had been clearly expressed by Ansel Adams some years before (July 1, 1957) in a letter to conservationist and former director of the National Park Service, Horace Marden Albright (1890–1987). He wrote that to the best of his limited legal expertise, he had taken an unbiased view of the Wilderness Bill. On an emotional level, Adams declared himself very much in favour of any means to ensure greater protection of wild places. He felt that this and similar legislation passed in the preceding decades could be regarded as a form of awareness, a "National Conscience", since it was beyond most people's ability to grasp legal complexity and nuance, yet they could and did respond to the underlying reasons for such laws. In this same letter, Adams emphasized the importance of National Parks for human recreation and nature conservation and that they should be excluded of economic exploitation. His thinking was that the main goals of the National Parks were to inspire, and allow people to discover for themselves the creative or spiritual aspects of the wilderness while engaging in recreation appropriate to the environment in which they found themselves. He stated that the main parks were designated and conserved not for commercial gain but for the benefit of people, and as such, were spaces devoted to spiritual growth and enjoyment in the purest sense of the word and therefore indicative of a civilized and progressive society (Alinder & Stillman, 1988, pp. 244–246). Again, in a letter dated October 7, 1960 to Henry J. Vaux (1912–2000), dean of the Department of Forestry at the University of California, Berkeley, Ansel Adams drew attention to the importance, for people's emotional and psychological balance, of having contact with the wilderness, which must be kept "wild" and not managed by man. He wrote that we have a series of choices to make: to have wild spaces or not; to admit that the beauty of the wild has a spiritual and emotional value or not; to embrace a philosophy grounded in experiencing the simplicity found in nature or not; to devote ourselves to conserving the natural earth or not, and that any minimal management required can be done without harming the intrinsic spirit of the wilderness (Alinder & Stillman, 1988, pp. 266–267). In a letter written the year before his death to the *San Jose Mercury News*, Ansel Adams was pessimistic about the battle for conservationism and once again expressed the need for sustainable consumption of natural resources as the only way to ensure that Mother

Earth is not depleted of them. He wrote that since 1919, as a summer custodian at the Sierra Club in Yosemite, he had spent the better part of his life working with so many people on conservation and environmental issues. At the age of 79, he simply refused to give up and watch the environment — and all that had been done and achieved to preserve and properly manage these valuable physical, aesthetic and recreational resources that are part of the world in which we live — be destroyed. He commented that the earth's abundance and beauty, including human activities such as mining and oil extraction, logging and agricultural production, are part of our environment to be used both now and in the distant future, and that under proper management, these resources, many of which are renewable, should last forever (Alinder & Stillman, 1988, pp. 366–367).

5. Landscape Photography as a Memory Tool for Wilderness and Nature Conservation

The need to contemplate nature in a disinterested way, to feel its beauty was emphasized by Grimaldi (2011, pp. 140–141) who even states that everything in a landscape that invites us to conquest, appropriation or predation, keep us from perceiving the aesthetics of a landscape and experiencing its beauty. The landscape has a unit that does not allow it to be divided. Finally, a landscape is only beautiful if we do not imagine having control or power over it. The aesthetic experience of the beauty of a landscape is the same as we have with works of art.

The aesthetic appreciation of nature must incorporate our moral capacity to recognize and respect it as its own reality, separate from our presence, and as having a story to tell. It requires attentive eyes and ears to discern what story it may be telling with its specific sensitive surface (Saito, 2011, p. 336).

The aesthetic appreciation and the ecological point of view of a landscape are two sides of the same coin. The aesthetic vision is interested in the landscape, while the landscape is the environment of ecology considered as an object of contemplation. In the delight that accompanies landscape contemplation, both the environment promoted by the landscape and the well-being we experience in that environment contribute to satisfying our vital requirements as human beings (Assunto, 2011, p. 375).

The narrative that the landscape intends to transmit to our attentive eyes is its memory; the history of its natural past and the one modified by man. Nature conservation today requires urgent environmental action. Following Ansel Adams's way of thinking and life philosophy, landscape photography can be actively and militantly involved in this process.

Disclosure Statement

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