

THE VIEWER & THE VIEWED

This display, which includes works on paper by Gainsborough, Turner and David Cox, explores English landscape art from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century from a socio-political perspective. Partially due to the French Revolution (1789-99) and the Napoleonic wars (1803-15), which prevented English artists from travelling to the continental Europe, the British landscape increasingly became a source of inspiration. These travel restrictions also favoured the development of domestic tourism, allowing upper- and middle-class Britons to explore their own nation. Consequently, this period saw an increase in access to the countryside, both via tourism and art.

Access to land, though, also had a strong political significance: only landowners had voting rights. Around the end of the 18th century, this political structure began to be challenged, encouraged by the revolutionary rhetoric coming from America and France. Opposition to the political system culminated in the first Reform Act of 1832, which began the slow process of opening up suffrage to a broader share of the population.

From the late 20th century, art historians have explored how landscape art became a way for artists to take part in political debate by reinforcing, or at times questioning, who was granted access to the land, and consequently political power. This display will look at how perspectival viewpoints can be read as a way of reinforcing upper- and middle-class power over the land. It will also consider how figures and their interactions with landscapes could be used as a metaphor for class dynamics. Critically engaging with landscapes is especially relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. Current travel restrictions have not only made us appreciate our local landscape, but they also underscore how access to it can still be a privilege.

Display curated by Giulia Schirripa, Arts Society Collections Intern.

Please take a moment to adjust to the low light levels required to help preserve these fragile works.

Find out more



KEY CONCEPTS

Picturesque landscape:

an artfully arranged depiction of a natural scene, aimed to please the viewer.

Audiences:

this refers to the intended viewers at the time the work was made. The assumption is that these works were owned and seen by upper- or middle-class collectors, broadly the same people who undertook tours in Britain.

Figures:

often, but not exclusively, representing rural labourers, they were commonly considered mere compositional elements within landscapes. Art historian Elizabeth Helsingers notes that these figures were 'fixed in a place like the rural labourer, circumscribed within a social position and a locality, unable to grasp the larger entity, England'. This refers to these labourers' inability to wield political power, and thus shape the nation. Since voting rights were connected to land ownership, the depiction of these people as subjugated to the land reinforces their historical political exclusion.

Low point of view:

a type of perspective that recreates the experience of tourism by both giving the audience the same point of view as an actual traveller in the landscape, and by the monumentalisation of touristic landmarks like abbeys or castles. As tourism was a pastime limited to upper and middle-class Britain during this period, this perspective reinforces the socio-political power held by the intended viewer.

Prospect view:

a type of perspective, which became prevalent by the late-16th century, that places the viewer in an elevated or bird's eye position in relation to the scene, creating the illusion of great depth and space. In 1712, the essayist Joseph Addison stated that 'a spacious horizon is an image of liberty'. Specifically, he was talking about the ability of the viewer to control the landscape through his gaze. The power of the viewer's gaze was thought to be connected with abstract thinking, a skill only upper- and middle-class men were thought to possess.

