

The picturesque as an aesthetic category in the art of travelers: notes on J. M. Rugendas's work.

Pablo Diener

Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso, Brazil. Email: pdiener@terra.com.br

ABSTRACT

The aesthetic category of “picturesque” was incorporated in the conceptual repertoire of artists and art theorists during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Its content has always had an unstable character. Initially, its meaning alluded to a particular way of seeing and seizing nature, followings classic artists' composition canons. Later, it was used in a more comprehensive sense as a form of perception and recording of reality in different fields. This article studies the different connotations that “picturesque” had for travelers that followed the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt. By examining the work of J. M. Rugendas, it is possible to observe that aesthetic categories played an essential role in linking art work and scientific exploration projects in the American continent during the nineteenth century.

Key words: picturesque, art and science, scientific travelers, J. M. Rugendas.

During the nineteenth century many illustration albums referring to voyages made throughout the American continent used the phrase “picturesque travel” in their titles. However, the term picturesque is

not only a common denominator of a certain type of publication. It constitutes an aesthetic category, an instrument meant to apprehend the experiences the traveler lived away from his or her everyday world. Therefore, in order to evaluate these sources it is appropriate to inquire into the precise meaning, acceptations and application of this term in travel descriptions. This becomes particularly relevant nowadays as more historical writings are using this type of material, as a source for their research.

This essay does not intend to carry out a theoretical analysis of the aesthetic ideas in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact, there is a series of outstanding studies on this matter¹. The intention here is to bring to mind the essential outlines of this category, its initial meaning and acceptations incorporated along the years, with the aim of examining its sense in the particular case of Johann Moritz Rugendas and his work.

When it comes to the observation of the young Latin American countries during the first half of the nineteenth century this man may well be a paradigmatic figure. The Bavarian artist was born in 1802 in Augsburg, into a family of long artistic tradition and was brought up in the context of art academies, where the postulates of aesthetic ideas were discussed and put into practice. Even before he turned twenty the young artist began a career as an illustrator of scientific voyages, and then in 1821 was hired to form part of an expedition to Brazil. The trip lasted almost four years and during this time Rugendas gained the experience that would later enable him to become one of the most remarkable illustrators of the American continent. Then, Rugendas decided to commence—and fund—his own journey, embarking upon the longest voyage ever undertaken by a single artist: in the course of fifteen years he covered Latin America from Mexico to Cape Horn, visiting Mexico, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

As a result of this journey he produced almost four thousand pieces, including drawings, watercolors, and oils. After his first trip to Brazil the book *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil* (Paris, 1827-1835) was printed. A similar publication was expected to come from his new journey, describing his picturesque travels throughout Latin America.

An *in folio* format of the edition dedicated to Brazil contains one hundred lithographs based on drawings by the German artist. In an advertising pamphlet accompanying this volume, the French editor Godefroy Engelmann expresses the way in which we should see the picturesque in order to consider it an editorial genre. This leaflet circulated in 1826 with the intention of attracting supporters to this onerous enterprise, and in it Engelmann evoked the hope that new ties should emerge between Europe and the new

¹ See, chiefly: Jean Adhémar, 1997 (1937-). *La France Romantique. Les lithographies de Paysage au XIXème siècle*. Paris: Somogy Éditions d'Art. Johannes Dobai. 1974-1977. *Die Kunstliteratur des Klassizismus und der Romantik in England*. Berna: Benteli Verlag; 3 vols; Christopher Hussey. 1927. *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View*. London & New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

American states. He expressed that “every cultured individual should feel the growing need, or rather the obligation of getting to know with more precision the world, this place where new interests of states and particulars, are associating on a daily basis. A world toward which new hopes are directed every day, that occupies an increasing space of our minds, our feelings, our existence as a whole; this world that is becoming increasingly important for statesmen, intellectuals, merchants, finally, for men in general, under every circumstance”².

With these words the editor seemed to be referring tacitly to the *Statistiques Départementales*, a project initiated by Napoleon, intended to construct a *Déscription générale de la France*. By comparing the book on Brazil with these French enterprises he suggested that the former would also be useful, as it offered information on a promising territory. The tenor of the title also indicated that the publication would be of great interest to the general public, since picturesque travels were pleasant miscellanies, filled with cultured references that allowed the reader to link the unknown with the familiar.

Carl Nebel, another German traveler who visited Mexico in the early 1830s, explicitly manifested the purpose of these sort of books by announcing in the introduction of his *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la partie la plus intéressante du Mexique*, (Paris, 1836): “the New World, so rich to Europe for its curious and interesting objects, has been constantly visited by illustrious travelers who have left us their precious notions on statistics, natural history, etcetera. However, maybe for disdain or any other reason, these men have treated the picturesque feature, one I believe to be as interesting as the scientific aspects of the country, with much negligence. Not everybody can be a geographer, botanist, mineralogist, etcetera, but certainly everyone is curious”³.

Nebel uses the term picturesque to name a sort of object or a motive different from those related to science. A similar distinction—although more oriented towards defining a particular way of observing—can be found in a journalistic article written by Alexander von Humboldt meant to promote Nebel’s publication. In it the Prussian naturalist predicts that this book “will satisfy every expectation, archaeologically, as well as picturesquely”⁴. In fact, Nebel’s *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique* covers a wide range of subjects, including plates illustrating nature, cities, archaeological sites and the peoples of Mexico.

² Engelmann in Pablo Diener and María Fátima Costa. 2002. *Rugendas e o Brasil*. Sao Paulo: Editora Capivara; 93.

³ Carl Nebel. 1836. *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la partie la plus intéressante du Mexique*. Paris; M. Moench / M. Gau; Preface.

⁴ Alexander von Humboldt. 1835. “Mexicanische Alterthümer”. In: *Annales der Erd-, Länder-und Völkerkunde*. Berlin, vol. XI, num. 4 (1/31/1835), 321-325; 322.

Based on the comments that characterize these types of works, we perceive that the term picturesque is used partly to refer to a themed area, and to a certain degree it also alludes to a way of comprehending reality. When it adverts to a procedure it becomes clear that it does not have science's systematic rigor, although its contents include easily understandable information, presented in a friendly and pleasant way.

It appears appropriate then to ask ourselves, what is the formula of the picturesque?

THE PICTURESQUE: AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY

The word itself refers to things concerning the art of painting. It was frequently used with this acceptation in the course of the eighteenth century, being applied chiefly to the analysis of gardens and parks. This simile suggests on the one hand an analogy between sketching sceneries and landscaping, and on the other the fact that parks or gardens should be perceived as a series of images.

Towards the mid eighteenth century picturesque evolved from this thematic field and became a concept related to art theory. Its outset emanates from William Gilpin's writings (1792)⁵; approaching the last decades of the century it started to be identified as an aesthetic category located somewhere between the beautiful and the sublime.

Edmund Burke had discussed these referential categories in depth in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)⁶ by analyzing them from the subject's perspective. He observes the impression caused by the object's properties and describes the particular attributes that make it beautiful or sublime. Therefore, he portrays beauty as "that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it." Then he enumerates these features in order of importance: something that is comparatively small and smooth, that gradually changes, that has a delicate profile and colored with light and brilliant but not strong or gleaming colors⁷. Nonetheless, "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is

⁵ See mainly: William Gilpin. 2001. (1792-). "Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape". In *Aesthetics and the Picturesque, 1795-1840*. Bristol, Thoemmes Press; vol. 1.

⁶ Edmund Burke, 1824. (1757-). *An Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London, A. Robertson & Co.

⁷ *Ibid*; 154.

a source of the sublime”. He then mentions darkness, greatness, magnificence and grandeur as the qualities that provoke this feeling⁸.

William Gilpin, an Anglican pastor concerned with the cultural level of his parishioners, maintained an attentive dialogue with these categories. An art enthusiast, dilettante in artistic matters and persistent traveler, he described the English landscape, determined to articulate nature, bringing it closer to the principles of painting composition. In his *Observations on the River Wye* (1782) he writes: “Nature is always great in design. She is an admirable colorist also; and harmonizes tints with infinite variety, and beauty. But she is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole. Either the foreground, or the background, is disproportioned: or some awkward line runs across the piece: or a tree is ill-placed: or a bank is formal: or something or other is not exactly what it should be”⁹.

Thus, the picturesque acquired a normative value. In his *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape*—published in 1792 but that began circulating earlier in handwritten copies—Gilpin states: “We seek [the picturesque] among all the ingredients of landscape - trees - rocks - broken-grounds - woods - rivers - lakes - plains - valleys - mountains - and distances. These objects in themselves produce infinite variety. No two rocks, or trees are exactly the same. They are varied, a second time, by combination; and almost as much, a third time, by different lights, and shades, and other aerial effects. Sometimes we find among them the exhibition of a whole; but oftener we find only beautiful parts”¹⁰.

The artist’s hand intervenes precisely in the construction of a harmonious composition, whether it is a park, a garden or a picture. The canons that define the preeminent models of picturesque perfection vary from one author to another. Opposed to the classical elegance of spirit defended by Gilpin, we may find, for example, the ideas put forward by Uvedale Price: a passion for gothic ruins, isolated rural cottages—preferably storm-stricken—or groups of rustic individuals¹¹. This contrasting position demonstrates how the picturesque oscillated between the beautiful and the sublime.

Mainly through English guide-books, the cultured traveler but chiefly artists, were taken not only to places of interest. These travel guides contained information on the observation sites most similar to the viewpoints of renowned artists. The most famous example of this type of guide is Thomas West’s

⁸ *Ibid*; 66.

⁹ Gilpin in Malcolm Andrews, 1995. “A Picturesque Template: The Tourists and their Guide-books”. In: Dana Arnold (ed.) *The Picturesque in late Georgian England*. Papers given at The Georgian Group Symposium. London: The Georgian Group, 3-9; 4.

¹⁰ Gilpin, 2001 (1792-), *op. cit.*, 42.

¹¹ Uvedale Price. 2001 (1810-) “Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the sublime and the beautiful; and on the use of studying pictures, for the period of improving real landscape”. In: *Aesthetics and the Picturesque, 1795-1840*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press; vol. 3.

Guide to the Lakes that reached no less than seven editions between 1778 and 1799. In this book the author takes his readers “from the delicate touches of Claude, verified on Coniston lake, to the noble fences of Poussin, exhibited on Windermere-water, and, from these, to the stupendous romantic ideas of Salvador Rosa on the lake of Derwent”¹².

Hence, as Malcolm Andrews points out, “picturesque tourism as a controlled aesthetic experience” emerges¹³. In this instance the traveler embarks upon a journey that will take him to new surroundings away from home, exposing the person to new landscapes, some of them intimidating. The picturesque becomes a way of assimilating this experience, of taming the unknown, of organizing the unstructured. The artistic language proves to be a mediating instrument, one that readjusts reality according with predetermined canons.

Gilpin mentions that nature’s “living forms fall under the picturesque eye, in the course of travel; and are often objects of great attention”. However, he states that “we regard them merely as the ornament of scenes [...], we merely consider general shapes, dresses, groups, and occupations”. In the same sense, he indicates that the presence of animals is of great interest to the traveler and he especially highlights the attractive of the “elegant relics of ancient architecture [...]. They are consecrated by time; and almost deserve the veneration we pay to the works of nature itself”.¹⁴

The use of this language in reference to visual records brought changes to the artistic field in England, but especially outside of this country. It allowed for the incorporation of the most diverse motifs: monuments (ruined or not), custom scenes and folk images. Nonetheless, in his anecdote on Louis XIV, Voltaire relates how the king execrated a painting by David Teniers—based on scenes of plebeian everyday life and hung in one of his chambers in the early 1700s—by ordering to remove those “dolts” out of his sight. Just a century after this incident, these motifs found its way into the most prominent salons. Folk themes such as washerwomen from southern Italy, or Andalusian peasants, ruined medieval monasteries, or modest rural dwellings were no longer seen as mere ethnographic curiosities, or objects belonging to a distant past. The new aesthetic concept of the picturesque enabled them to find the key to become a category of art.

It is very hard to cite one universally accepted definition of the picturesque, since it transformed from its original sense (related to painting), into a term that evoked something delightful for the observer, and stimulating to the senses. The term picturesque then began to represent variety, diversity and

¹² West in Christopher Hussey, 1927. *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View*. London & New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons: 126.

¹³ Andrews, 1995, *op. cit.*, 7.

¹⁴ Gilpin, 2001 (1792-), *op. cit.*, 45-46.

unevenness. Despite the fact that initially Gilpin had given this category a classical meaning, by the 1800s the word frequently referred to crude, rough, rustic, and unsophisticated motifs.

With the use of this category, the perception of what was artistically different was not only applied within European boundaries. It also facilitated the observation of Islamic and Near Eastern themes, giving way to what we now know as artistic Orientalism.

Thus, the European traveling artist's apprehension of the American landscape, and in a broader sense the American world, was slowly shaped, with the picturesque as an important support and framework. The diffusion and acceptance of this aesthetic principle allowed for the acknowledgement of these works in sophisticated environments. As an example we may find the princes of Thurn & Taxis's exquisite collection in Regensburg. They acquired no less than five of Rugendas's American-themed oils: two Brazilian landscapes, one street scene from Mexico City and two compositions dedicated to Chilean Mapuches.

Engelmann implicitly evokes this mediating role carried out by picturesque art in order to persuade potential subscribers of the book he would later produce from Rugendas's drawings. In this same sense, the artist felt he was acting as an interpreter even until his final days. As Alexander von Humboldt wrote: "I worked hard and wanted to be the illustrator of the new territories discovered by Columbus. I wanted to show the world the treasures offered by picturesque tropics [...]". Although his words—written by a tired and unsuccessful man—denote that his explicit intention was to bring the distant closer, he not only meant it as shortening a concrete distance. He completes this idea in this letter: "[...] for there are little organizations that can follow this arduous path. I felt a call to be the pilot of the arts in a field others will be able to represent exhaustively"¹⁵.

The traveling painter assumed the task of domesticating what was different. In order to do so, the artistic adventure imposed two main assignments on him: firstly, to discover an archetype to represent the American landscape. Secondly, to construct a common thread, that is to say, a route through the territories that had only been incipiently apprehended and explored using European scientific and artistic instruments. We are interested in analyzing how the proposal of the picturesque affected the execution of these two endeavors.

¹⁵ Rugendas in Albert Hämmerle. 1937. "Die letzten Maler Rugendas", in: *Vierteljahresschrift zur Kunst und Geschichte Augsburgs*. Augsburg, vol. 3; 8.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PICTURESQUE LANDSCAPE

When it comes to the visual register of American nature Alexander von Humboldt's writings must be taken as the foundational impulse. The German scientific traveler drew attention to the utility and relevance of developing a style of landscape painting dedicated to the tropics. This was present in the *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (1805-1807)¹⁶ and continued until the *Kosmos* (1845-1862)¹⁷. After studying the distribution of vegetation in different climate zones, the artist expected he would find the richest concentration of motives for his work in this geographic space. From an aesthetic perspective two great classes of plants acquire particular relevance and he determines their importance by the way they are distributed in space, that is, whether their presence is massive or individual in a given surface. In this sense he observes the plants that develop socially in large groups of one specific species. On the other hand, he looks attentively at plants that grow isolated and scattered and that do not coexist with other individuals of their same species. The fact that in tropical latitudes the latter are more common makes the landscape infinitely more interesting and diverse. However, in temperate zones, where the scene is dominated by social plants, "there is a more homogenous view of vegetation, thus less picturesque"¹⁸.

Therefore, when he encouraged the development of a tradition of landscape painting in the tropics the naturalist assumed the role of an aesthetic theorist. With this, he situated it in the context of western art history by giving it reference points, and above all, by formulating concrete proposals for the procedure supposed to be followed.

In the process of fully apprehending nature he awards a very relevant role to artistic intuition; still, this also intends to promote his study. However, he acknowledges scientific studies as an essential component that enables us to fully understand of the landscape. This matter is analyzed minutely in the second part of *Kosmos*, where he critiques several literary descriptions and representations of the countryside in visual arts throughout the years, which had contributed to draw attention to the natural world. In this sense we understand the poetic prose of the *Ansichten der Natur* (1808-, published in French in that same year with the title *Tableaux de la Nature*) and to some extent the *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (1807). For example, he calls for artists to register the infinite multiplicity of the American flora: "What can be more picturesque than the arborescent Ferns, which spread their tender

¹⁶ Alexander von Humboldt. 1989 (1807-). *Schriften zur Geographie der Pflanzen*. Edition of "Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen" (1807), commented by Hanno Beck. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

¹⁷ Alexander von Humboldt. 1993 (1845-1862). *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*. Edited and commented by Hanno Beck. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; 2 vols.

¹⁸ Humboldt, 1989 (1807-), *op. cit.*, 48-49.

foliage above Mexican laurel-oak! What more charming than the aspect of banana-groves, shaded by those lofty grasses, the Gadua and Bamboo!”¹⁹.

The picturesque lies in nature itself, in its richness, its contrasts and, most emphatically, in its coherence. Humboldt suggests an idea of the picturesque that is conceived from the natural elements. The innovative element that differs from what Gilpin had previously formulated resides precisely here: what exactly makes a motive picturesque. In one episode of his travel descriptions, the English pastor stops in the village of Tintern and he describes how vegetation grew over some ruins, giving them what he calls “the ornament of time”. His choice of words is very similar to Humboldt’s and the allusion to the euphonic names of plants is enticing: “Ivy, in masses uncommonly large, has taken possession of many parts of the walls; and gives a happy contrast to the grey coloured stone... Nor is she undecorated. Moss of various hues with lichens maidenhair, penny-leaf and other common plants scattered on the surface [...] together they create those flowery tones, which give the richest aspect to the ruin”²⁰.

But here the contrast—the strictly picturesque—emerges from the opposition between ruins and vegetation. In Gilpin this aesthetic category often comes into being precisely when it unravels the crossing of elements belonging to two or more aspects of reality, or when the pictorial conception evokes ideas that go beyond a merely visual experience.

The difference with Humboldt’s point of view is not based on the idea that the latter postulates naturalism to the letter. Quite the contrary, the aesthetic world of the author of *Kosmos* takes its definition from an association with a classical tradition²¹. This naturalist always had in mind a painting of nature with ideal connotations. Thus, in a historical recapitulation of landscape representations, he declares his admiration for Titian, since he was the first artist to overcome what he describes as a “careful but scrupulously exact imitation of nature”²². Then he states: “The grand landscape painting style is the product of a deep comprehension of Nature and of the transformation operated in the mind”²³. The alteration or intellectual elaboration he refers to allows us to understand this artistic genre. “Each latitude has also its peculiar character, and gives rise to various impressions in us [...]. As we recognize a certain physiognomy in single organic beings, and as descriptive botany and zoology are, in a narrower sense of the word, the dissection of plants and animals, so there is also a certain Physiognomy of Nature, which

¹⁹ *Ibid*; 64.

²⁰ Gilpin in Hussey, 1927, *op. cit.*, 117.

²¹ For Alexander von Humboldt’s aesthetic connections, see: Pablo Diener. 1999. “La estética clasicista de Humboldt aplicada al arte de viajeros”. In *Amerística. La ciencia del Nuevo Mundo*. Mexico DF. Year 2, num. 3, 41-49.

²² Humboldt, 1993 (1845-1862), *op. cit.*, II/69-70.

²³ *Ibid*, II/87.

belongs exclusively to each latitude [...]. To comprehend this, and to communicate it visibly to others, is the province of landscape painting”²⁴.

Coherence in the physiognomic representation of nature—a principle derived from physical geography—must then become the central aspect in the composition of a landscape painting. This discipline appears as a milestone in Humboldt’s scientific thinking: it was conceived before his voyage to America and in the Introduction to *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1814-1825) it is mentioned as the science that guided his observations in this continent. According to this theoretical and methodological plan, geographic phenomena (chiefly the lives of plants), will be thought of and comprehended as the result of the interaction among all elements of nature. Thus, the interaction of several geographical variables determines the configuration of the landscape. If artists are aware of this intellectual discovery, scientific knowledge would turn out to be useful. It would then underpin the construction of credible and plausible landscapes.

However, he did not intend for traveling artists to execute strictly naturalistic views. Quite the contrary, he suggested that their compositions should include all the things that could appear in a certain environment. The representation of space, then, should be constructed in proportion to the conditions imposed by the different geographical factors, with all the things it could contain in its optimal state. Consequently, the painter does not behave as a slave of what is already in a scene, but as the creator of what may be there. By following the theories of physical geography and using his scientific understanding, the artist can and should complete his work with all that he could add to the picture.

According to this proposal, profound contemplation and intellectual elaboration based on science would lead the artist down a safe creative road, provided that he identifies the physiognomic archetypes of nature. In this particular formulation the concept of ‘model’ gains different connotations to the ones we find in the field of the picturesque. The traveling artist will not adequately apprehend his experiences by imitating the works of other artists: science is the aid when understanding and organizing different realities.

The way in which intellectual accomplishments are manifested through visual language, generating new modes of perception and artistic registry, has been analyzed for several periods in art history. Erwin Panofsky, for example, demonstrated the close relation between mathematical rationalization of space and its unitary, coherent and infinite representation during the Renaissance. This depiction was attained using central perspective as a main recourse. The new concept of infinity—which was no longer the result of divine prefiguration, but of empirical reality—was then brought into the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II/78-79.

language of plastic arts²⁵. Charlotte Klonk also researched on a subject closer to our topic, when she studied the geological configuration of the island of Staffa, a craggy rock underpinned by basaltic formations off the western coast of Scotland.

Staffa was the object of numerous studies and, as Klonk states, due to geological fieldwork the representations of this place shifted substantially between 1790 and 1830. Initially, descriptions and images mainly show admiration for this wonderful creation, highlighting the bizarre character of the island's basaltic columns. However, towards the end of the period the focus is diluted, in order to show the rocks in their surroundings, so the traces of natural history appear through the contextual particularities. In other words, geology became a very important factor in the emergence of a new way of seeing and drawing the rock. Klonk classifies this as “a phenomenological way of perception”²⁶.

European artists in America came to own the term ‘picturesque’. In this process we confirm that Humboldt's physical geography turned out to be the discipline that enabled a new conception of the model: now, archetypes are accepted as a typology of landscape. Through an attentive contemplation—carried out inductively—the travelers must come to understand the kind of landscape they are confronted with, following the instructions presented in the *Essai sur la géographie des plantes*. Once they identify it and are interpenetrated with its system, they will be able to freely recreate and compose it. They will then deduce from this already internalized coherence, all that is proper to that environment.

Thus, when creating a composition, the artist will frequently go back to more traditional sources of the picturesque, such as Claude Lorraine's, Jacob Ruysdael's or Nicolas Poussin's composition forms.

In this effort to define models for the American scenery, the first work that acquired paradigmatic value was the Count de Clarac's *Virgin Jungle of Brazil* (1819), based on observations carried out during a trip to Rio de Janeiro in 1816. The sheet was exposed in the Parisian Salon in 1819 and was engraved in a copper plate in 1822. Consequently, it was a widely diffused image, praised by Humboldt as the most beautiful composition of tropical nature, adhered to what he defines as “a feeling of truth”²⁷.

As the title indicates, the place is undetermined, although its generic and typological identification correspond to the Atlantic flora. This becomes apparent if we look at the vegetation incorporated by the author in the composition. The floristic diversity is extraordinary; the image as a

²⁵ Erwin Panofsky, 1991 (1927-). *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. New York, Zone Books.

²⁶ Charlotte Klonk, 1997. “From Picturesque Travel to Scientific Observation: Artists' and Geologists' Voyages to Staffa”. In: ROSENTHAL, Michael; PAYNE, Christiana, and WILCOX, Scott (eds.). *Prospects for the Nation: Recent Essays in British Landscape, 1750-1880*. Studies in British Arts 4. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 205-229; 205.

²⁷ Donato Mello Júnior, 1973. “Alexandre von Humboldt e o Conde de Clarac. Uma interpretação artística francesa da nossa floresta tropical pelo sábio naturalista alemão”. In: *Revista Brasileira de Cultura*, 16 (1973), 121-136; 131.

whole is constructed with strong contrasts of chiaroscuro, resulting from two main elements. Firstly, the shadow of a huge tree trunk, which creates a dark area in the first plane; secondly, the reflection of sunbeams on a stream, penetrating in the dense forest through a clearing. The large trunk hides this source of light from the observer. Immensity, darkness and grandeur all combined are unequivocal references to the idea of the sublime, that is, to nature implacably imposing itself over insignificant men. This image is also accentuated by the presence of tiny Indians crossing the stream. Thus, Clarac adds an emotional element to the exactness of naturalist descriptions, and with this he applies the aesthetic categories that had been formulated since the mid eighteenth century.

Rugendas felt the impact of these works. This is evident in the pieces he composed in Europe, based on his recollections of the four-year voyage to Brazil. In them he also evokes Clarac's *Virgin Jungle of Brazil*. In 1831, when he began his journey through Mexico, we can perceive how he constructed his landscape views: always from detailed observations, but above all—and particularly in the most elaborate compositions—trying his best to identify every environment with an archetype derived from physical geography. The relevance of this principle becomes especially evident when we examine the whole group of works. We can confirm that when constructing his picturesque route the traveling artist did not register everything he encountered, but on the contrary, he defined a clearly identifiable selection. In Mexico his main motifs were, on the one hand, the jungle in the Eastern Sierra Madre, and on the other, the volcanic landscape of central and western regions. While in Chile, he took particular interest in the Andean scenery and we can barely find any marine drawings. The Peruvian and Bolivian altiplano, the Argentinean pampas and the southernmost regions of the continent—which he visited when traveling from Valparaiso to Buenos Aires—are also absent from his landscape repertoire.

Let us see, then how he conceived the thematic composition of his works, what we call a 'picturesque route'.

THE TRAVELING ARTIST AND THE PICTURESQUE ROUTE

In his classic book Christopher Hussey attracts our attention on an essential contradiction that moves the picturesque traveler. Even though his conception on nature is ideal and his purpose is to discover the existence of ideal scenes in his voyages, this search has little chances of success.

Nonetheless, the quest is appealing to him: “it is the expectation that maybe an ideal scene will once manifest itself before his eyes what pushes him and keeps him in motion”²⁸.

The traveling artist’s intentions in America also have ideal connotations: he tries to find generalizing images. For example, one landscape that summarizes a particular regional physiognomy, a group of individuals representative of a certain society, emblematic manifestations of their history or their material culture. In short, anything that helps to build a typical picture of a country or region.

The search for paradigmatic landscapes—where one could explicitly find all the elements needed to create the natural habitat for vegetation—had its model in Humboldt’s synoptic outline, annexed to his *Essai sur la géographie des plantes*, entitled “Physical Outline of Equinoctial Regions”. A transverse view of the South American continent schematically representing the highest Andean peaks, shows groups of plants according to the environmental and altitudinal conditions in which they appear. The artists’ task would then be to find the places where these factors—summarized in the above-mentioned synopsis—would somehow physically and realistically manifest themselves. The most extreme case of this type of composition was F. E. Church’s famous *Heart of the Andes*, a false landscape put together by joining fragments of real views.

As we have seen earlier, Gilpin gave the first impulse when it came to finding and registering individuals representative of a country or region. But at the same time a new type of composition was gathering momentum: human figures were no longer supposed to be mere decorations—as Gilpin had suggested—but instead they were to have a central role. This is the case, for example, of Goya’s first cardboards, produced for the workshop in charge of making tapestries for Spanish royal palaces. Folk motifs were interpreted in an idyllic way: the rural world appears as a place for playing, conversing, breathing fresh air and for enjoying nature, although some work is occasionally performed. Nevertheless, the bases for a more truthful way of observing reality were first laid in the works of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and expanded due to his influence on Romantic tradition. He established new parameters for the study of men, aimed at valuing different manifestations of life; artistically, the intention was to build the largest registry of the most diverse forms of human existence.

The travelers’ approach to human reality moves among these reference marks, sometimes coming closer to Gilpin—by including the figure as an ornament—, in other occasions following a classical spirit or trying to grasp reality with critical and scrutinizing eyes. In Rugendas we can confirm the presence of these different languages during the course of his voyage.

²⁸ Hussey, 1927, *op. cit.*, 83.

The definition of the motifs will always be a matter of sensibility and of mutual understanding between the traveler and the place he or she is visiting. Nonetheless, familiarity with the mechanisms related to the construction of a picturesque route will also be needed. Rugendas was an intuitive, attentive painter—a trait we attribute to his personality—who came in close contact with the keys that ruled the work of picturesque artists. This connection took place especially during an eighteen-month long journey to Italy between 1828 and 1829, that is, soon before he embarked upon his great American adventure.

In this trip he followed the steps that had been preestablished by English, French and German travelers in the previous century. They had come to Italy for two reasons: on the one hand, they were looking for the sources of culture, preferably in Rome. Around 1750 the areas surrounding Naples—Herculaneum and Pompeii, which had been discovered by archeology in the 1740s and 1750s respectively—also became popular. On the other hand, in the north they were seeking for better light and gentler nature than the one found in the cold and somber north. Furthermore, people in these places were supposed to live closer to Nature, an attribute that made them worthy of special attention.

In the body of work produced during his stay in Italy (more than two hundred drawings), we can hardly find any innovative motives that had not appeared earlier in other travelers' compositions. In Naples—an ancient antecedent of picturesque landscape according to literature—he visits the bay and the islands of Ischia and Capri, goes to Herculaneum and continues his way along the Amalfi Coast. In these sites and in Sicily his focus is placed on outlooks famous through literary and pictorial works. As might be expected, he observes the different peoples, such as the Pifferari, a group of musicians that serenaded a figure of the Virgin Mary. Rugendas faithfully assumed the tradition: his Italian work comes as a direct consequence of the picturesque route that had been defining itself for the last century.

Having this experience in mind, we achieve a better notion of why Rugendas chose a certain path through the American continent during his great tour commenced in 1831.

RUGENDAS: INVENTING PICTURESQUE ROUTES IN AMERICA²⁹

The Bavarian artist's voyage began in Mexico, a country he crossed from Veracruz to Manzanillo in the Pacific Ocean, that is, from east to west. During this first stage scientific expeditions were his main source of information. When recollecting the places he visited and registered more thoroughly, we find

²⁹ For references on Rugendas's work, see: DIENER, Pablo. 1998 (1997-). *Rugendas 1802-1858*. Art catalogue. Augsburg: Wissner Verlag.

that he emulated Alexander von Humboldt's previous works. In some cases—mainly in the archaeological field—other learned travelers suggested places of interest to him.

Two main themes guided his observation of the landscape: vegetation and geomorphology. When we flip through the folders containing his illustrations on Mexican flora, we constantly get the impression that he wanted them to accompany the *Essai sur la géographie des plantes*. Rugendas organizes his perception of space based on the physiognomic types of scenery, whether in the exuberance of the Eastern Sierra Madre—mainly in the space between Jalapa and Orizaba—, or in the drier regions of the central altiplano, with an important presence of agave, or towards the end of his Mexican voyage, where he attentively draws and paints the palm tree woods near the coast.

This can also be seen in his geomorphological observations, which were primarily devoted to volcanoes. His drawings and oil studies included the Orizaba, the monumental “hills of fire” around the capital city—Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl—, the “Mal Pais” in the west, where in 1759 the Jorullo volcano emerged, and the Colima, closer to the sea. These motives respond to an omnipresent restlessness among naturalists, who until early nineteenth century were entangled in a discussion on the origins of the earth's surface configuration. The dispute revolved around whether it was a result of marine sedimentation—as Neptunists assured—or if, as vulcanists stated, the emergence of terrestrial magma was the essential factor. Humboldt firmly supported the vulcanists' theory after he finished his voyage through America and this in consequence attracted interest to the geological studies directly related to volcanic phenomena. Following the steps of his mentor, Rugendas presented a vast iconography of Mexican volcanoes: he registered them as single individuals of natural history, located in a particular area and with a certain shape.

The most consistent part of his Mexican corpus is undoubtedly determined by his eagerness to examine the country's physical geography. However, he also devoted considerable attention to men and their culture. These drawings and oils create quite an accumulation of works, sometimes acquiring a leading role in independent compositions, in other occasions, used as motifs applied to the painting of physiognomic views. Nonetheless, their apprehension demonstrates that a rigorous inquiry process had taken place. For example, archaeological motives—very scarce indeed—show that Rugendas had come in contact with the works of previous artists, such as Guillaume Dupaix, a man commissioned by the Spanish Crown to explore ancient archaeological sites. This explorer had already registered the pyramids of Centla in Huatusco, near Orizaba. As a precedent Rugendas also found Jean Frédéric Waldeck's works, a Bohemian traveling artist and archaeology enthusiast, who had visited the ruins of Xochicalco soon before him. Still, in all probability he came in contact more than once with Dupaix's or even José Antonio

de Alzate's (a very cultivated Spanish friar) earlier works. From his writings on Teotihuacan we can deduce he is a very well informed traveler, whose notes intend to identify and bring out the coherence of this archaeological site.

This work is comprised by an important number of folk and custom scenes, which constituted an individual segment of the final volume when it was printed in Munich in 1848, entitled "Inhabitants of Mexico. Portraits and dresses". There is, however, a series of strictly folk paintings where these every-day life images are presented in a very idyllic manner. But Rugendas also seems to echo Gilpin's picturesque tradition, because these figures appear as elements that help manifest the "idea" of a scene. The English theorist commented on the value of those figures in these cases, based on a landscape description he characterizes as "intimidating", assuring that "nothing could be better for a scene of this type than a group of bandits"³⁰. Indeed, when Rugendas uses the figures in this way he submits them to the coherence of all the other elements of nature and utilizes them to round off and perfect the physiognomic representations of the landscape. Their purpose is close to the one Gilpin had intended for them, although for Rugendas their importance is greater and it goes on increasing as his South American journey progresses.

In fact, the decision of continuing the voyage through the southern part of the continent brought a considerable qualitative shift when compared with his Mexican stage, particularly regarding the construction of a picturesque route. In first place, he diverts from Humboldt's path; moreover, his stay in Chile, which lasted no less than eight years, was a decision made against Humboldt's suggestions, since he had warned him that those latitudes were of little or no interest for a painter. By looking at Rugendas's work we can interpret this choice as a major alteration in his thematic orientation. During the years that range from 1834 to 1837 he moves in an environment with geographic features that do not match Humboldt's expectations of the picturesque. His excursions included the zone between the parallels 30° and 37° south, that is, between Coquimbo and La Serena on the north, and the Biobio region on the south. In these areas encountered a temperate climate and very similar landscapes to the ones in southern Europe.

During those years his chief concern was the portrayal of population. In this registry we can find new ideas for the construction of thematic series. Here, the attention is placed on the Araucanians—who were still strongly defending their land by the time Rugendas was staying in Chile—and their territory, made famous by European literature such as Alonso de Ercilla's epic poem, Voltaire and even Chateaubriand.

³⁰ Gilpin in Hussey, 1927, *op. cit.*, 117.

Rugendas came in close contact with these peoples thoroughly portraying them when he traveled for a few months through the frontier region during late 1835 and early 1836. At the same time in *The Abduction* he began to elaborate a narrative sequence, by thematizing the latent conflict between Araucanians and Chileans. Inspired by oral tradition and the poem *The Captive*, by Argentinean author Esteban Echeverría—published in 1837 but already known especially in the artist’s circle—, he composed a visual story based on indigenous assaults on white villages and the subsequent abduction of women.

Just as Nebel had said, not everyone can be erudite, but everybody is curious. Thusly, even though Rugendas did not intend to write a chronicle about the political and military conflict, he became an interpreter of the dispute, and he translated what he saw following his contemporaries’ expectations.

He also dedicated part of his time to portraying other segments of the population, chiefly lower-class individuals in their quotidian activities, for the most part, mineworkers and peasants. Even though this side of his art proved to be less spectacular it is remarkable that he takes on a subject that had been unheard of until then in Chile. Probably the idea of making a systematic registry of population diversity had its latest precedent in Claudio Linati’s *Costumes Civils, Militaires et Religieux du Mexique* (Brussels, 1828). We must understand the publication of the *Album of Chilean Dresses* under this light, a volume printed in 1837 that did not get to have more than one fascicule with only five lithographs, since its editor, Jean-Baptiste Lebas, went bankrupt. Still, over a hundred studies stored in the Graphic Arts Collection in Munich prove that this was meant to be a great enterprise. The relevance of these motifs becomes evident when we see how the perception and interpretation of reality changed in the country. Particularly when compared with previous works we find that the relationship between the portrayal of local customs and landscape was altered. While in more elaborate paintings on Mexico figures are used to complement the representation of natural physiognomy, in easel pictures made for Chilean clients landscape often becomes a backdrop for local custom scenes.

Although notes on landscape are abundant in the especially rich folders containing drawings on Chile, and in others on Peru and Bolivia, we cannot identify a common denominator in them. They seem closer to a travel diary, where the artist keeps track of his visual experiences. After his stay in Mexico, the only time Rugendas ever composed a series of works with internal coherence again was during his journey through the Andean region between Chile and Argentina, from December 1837 through April 1838. Since the artist employed oil studies—a widely used alternative especially among European artists in Italy—we suppose there is some sort of continuity in these works. Rugendas also discovered that this style of painting was a very useful method of apprehending the Mexican and later the Andean landscapes. Apart from that, he rarely applied this technique to any other themed areas.

Orography and land morphology appear to be the common ground in the fifty views that compose this set. Among the main motifs in this series we find Andean valleys, mountain peaks, rock massifs or stratigraphic cuts that surface from spectacular landslides. Due to its monumentality and greatness this landscape has every connotation of the sublime in it. Nonetheless, the painter stresses these features by emphasizing light contrasts and capturing the scenery in various times of day, for instance, during the night, when the mountains' silhouette appears much more intimidating.

Placing mountains as a singular pictorial category has very well known precedents, predominantly in representations of the Alps. These mountains became famous for being primitive landscapes, through Swiss painter Caspar Wolf's eighteenth-century views, which were largely divulged by the agency of plate collections printed by an editor in Basle. Those landscapes were seen as original manifestations of tectonic history and seemed to help uncover some of the earth's mysteries. Rugendas brings this tradition to the American continent, as revealed by his contemplations of the Andes. This serves as an interesting counterpoint, especially to his Mexican works, which were more focused on plant geography and observations of volcanoes.

A long hiatus in Rugendas's artistic biography appears in the years after his journey through the Andes. During this time he suffered the most diverse mishaps: an accident in Argentina posterior to the crossing of the Andes, utter failure of his love relationship with a Chilean young lady (Clara Álvarez Condarco) and, no less, the miseries of an extremely unstable economic situation. This traveling artist seemed to be caught up in the traps of misfortune, which he will only get out of once he leaves the country. It is relevant to note, however, that when he arrives in Lima in November 1842, he resumes inventing a thematic route and creates new artistic motifs for his project, still looking for a delicate common thread.

In the Peruvian capital he encountered several motives already laid out by numerous authors. Among them we may find Alexander von Humboldt and Flora Tristan, whose memoirs were published in 1838 in Paris and which Rugendas mentioned to his Chilean interlocutor, Carmen Arriagada in the letters sent to her³¹. Very heterogeneous travelers had previously referred to the infinite appeal of this capital city, once center of the Peruvian viceroyalty. The vast repertoire includes views of Lima and the Rimac River from the Alameda and the city's rich architecture. Episodes of varied street life, the famous and controversial figures of "tapadas" or scenes of the pompous conventual life were also incorporated.

³¹ Óscar Pinochet de la Barra. 1989. *Carmen Arriagada. Cartas de una mujer apasionada*. Santiago, Chile: Editorial Universitaria; 191.

During the time Rugendas visited the city there was a large production of local images, depicting traditional folk scenes: excellent drawings, halfway between a cartoon and the description made by Pancho Fierro, a Peruvian artist born in 1810. While in Chile Rugendas was able to uncover motifs that had remained veiled, in Peru these were trite themes. Therefore, at least in Lima, his work consisted in recapping for his own records very well-known subjects. Perhaps this same fact led him to embark upon a journey through the altiplano region in late 1844, following a very unusual route. He boarded a ship in the port of Callao, going south in a trip that would take him from Tacna to La Paz. There, he bordered lake Titicaca on its southwestern side and continued his way to Cuzco. On the way back he went Arequipa, and from there to the port of Islay (today Mollendo), in the Pacific.

His observations on Andean baroque were one of the most important findings during this trip. The influence of this discovery can be seen in a drawing of the sculpture of Saint Rose of Lima located in Saint Dominic's church, executed by Melchor Caffa and inspired in Bernini's Saint Thérèse. Moreover, when he visits Andean cities his focus is placed on details, observing capitals and vaulted niches with great attention. This proved he had a particular interest in Andean baroque, an artistic language with unequivocally regional features. This is even more relevant, considering baroque in general—but particularly its American school—was repudiated by European neoclassical spirits. However, Rugendas's observations exhibit his regard for baroque details and group compositions.

During his short trip to the altiplano regions, he also tried to create a rich iconographic collection based on pre-Columbian past. Among his drawings there is a large number of pages dedicated to the Tiwanaku ruins; while in Cuzco he sketched Saint Dominic's church—built on top of the remains of the pre-Columbian temple of Koricancha—and Roca Mayor Street, with its famous stone of twelve angles. In this sense, his depiction of the Ollantaytambo ruins northeast of Cuzco, the first representation of this archaeological site, turned out to be Rugendas's greatest contribution in this field. Not many years later, one of the most important European publications dedicated to ancient Peru, used the artist's drawings to illustrate some *Peruvian Antiques*. This volume, published in 1851, was edited by Mariano Riveros (director of the Museum of Lima) and Johann Jacob von Tschudi (an erudite Americanist from Basle) and contained, among others, Rugendas's Ollantaytambo first fruits.

After this stage of his American voyage, Rugendas barely enunciated any new themes for his repertoire. As an example of this, we find historical paintings portraying Garibaldi's personality or drawings of military types who participated in the battle of the River Plate. During his four-month stay in Buenos Aires in 1845, he continued developing the *Abduction* subject, but above all, completed a series of studies dedicated to the gauchos, which he had begun during his first trip to Argentina in 1838.

Moreover, the former follows the same ideas behind the *Album of Chilean Dresses*, a contemporary group of illustrations. The year spent in Rio de Janeiro, up until August 1846, might be considered an epilogue to the fifteen long years this enterprise lasted. In the artist's mind, Brazil was probably a closed chapter in his picturesque art project.

* * *

By the time he reached the end of his voyage, Rugendas had built a wide repertoire of American themes, a kind of script of the most diverse geographical and demographical aspects. Those fifteen years of hard fieldwork account for the long process of making a magnum opus, representing picturesque America. This method of work implied constant decisions, regarding what should or should not be included and several criteria influenced this process, particularly his eagerness for the preservation of a link with contemporary scientific developments. The most evident proof of this appears in the registration of landscapes. However, the effect of the still incipient human sciences on the modeling of his own artistic proposal can also be perceived. Several influences become evident through fragments of Rugendas's legacy: Johann Gottfried von Herder's cultural ethnographic tradition, or studies on traditionally classical archaeology. In conclusion, the understanding of the peoples' history, in the spirit of Jules Michelet's *Le Peuple*, which was published on the same year our artist ended his American expedition.

As we already know, the work was never completed. Rugendas failed since he did not finish his project with the publication of a book on his travels; and this was supposed to be the primordial aim of any enterprise meant to explore the world. In that sense, we can only intuit what his last options were, how he communicated his vision of the American continent to the rest of the world. Nonetheless, every hint points in the same direction. He, too, seized the category of picturesque, highlighting the protean character this term had during its first years in the eighteenth century. Then, he modeled it according to his expectations and needs, accentuating its connotations as an instrument for the comprehension of American diversity.

Illustrations:

1. Count de Clarac, *Virgin Jungle of Brazil* (1821), engraving, in Pablo Diener and María de Fátima Costa, *Rugendas e o Brasil*. Sao Paulo, Editora Carpivara Ltda., 2002, 45.

2. J. M. Rugendas, *Landscape in Brazilian Virgin Jungle* (1830), oil on canvas, in Diener and Costa, *op. cit.*, 52.
3. J. M. Rugendas, *Colima Volcano as seen from Zapotlan* (1834), oil on cardboard, in Diener and Costa, *op. cit.*, 90.
4. J. M. Rugendas, *View of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl Volcanoes* (1831), oil on cardboard, in Pablo Diener, *Rugendas, 1802-1858*. Germany, Goethe Institut Santiago and Goethe Institut Sao Paulo, 1998, 215.
5. J. M. Rugendas, *A mountain sinking near El Juncal* (1838), oil on cardboard, Diener, *op. cit.*, 102.
6. J. M. Rugendas, *Mineworker with a sack on his back* (1835-1838), pencil on paper, Diener, *op. cit.*, 256.
7. J. M. Rugendas, *The Malón* (c. 1836), oil on canvas, Diener, *op. cit.*, 42.
8. J. M. Rugendas, *Vaulted Niche in Santo Domingo de la Paz Convent* (1844), pencil on paper, Diener, *op. cit.*, 56.
9. J. M. Rugendas, *Capital in the Church of Tiratata* (1844), pencil on paper, Diener, *op. cit.*, 107.

Translated by María Paz Fernández Smits

Translation from **Historia (Santiago)**, Santiago, v.40, n.2, p. 285-309, Dec. 2007.