



Traveling Artists in America: Visions and Views

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ABSTRACT: Visual registers of Latin America acquired new characteristics at the dawning of the 19th century. Alongside the pointedly secular practice of the scientific Enlightenment, naturalistic in character, there emerged an artistic current that produced images with a strong subjective quality. This American iconography of the 19th century was the work of traveling artists. In the exercise of their work, painters and drawers were led through modern esthetical premises that proposed an amalgam of artistic activity and the production of scientific knowledge. This article intends to venture into that genre of the arts based on a study of the theoretical context that sustains it, observing the range of themes it covered.

KEYWORDS: travel art; American iconography; picturesque travels; topographic paintings; art and science; Alexander von Humboldt

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RESUMEN: *La América de los artistas viajeros: visiones y miradas.*- Los registros visuales de la América ibérica adquirieron un perfil nuevo con los albores del siglo XIX. Paralelamente a la práctica más que secular de la ilustración científica de carácter naturalista surgió una vertiente artística que produjo un tipo de imágenes con una fuerte carga subjetiva. Esa iconografía americana decimonónica fue obra de los artistas viajeros. En el ejercicio de su tarea, pintores y dibujantes fueron conducidos por premisas estéticas modernas, que proponían una amalgama del quehacer artístico con la producción de conocimiento científico. Este artículo propone una incursión en ese género de las bellas artes a partir de un estudio del contexto teórico que la sustenta, observando el abanico temático que abarcó.

PALABRAS CLAVE: arte de viajeros; iconografía americana; viajes pintorescos; pintura topográfica; arte y ciencia; Alexander von Humboldt

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The work of traveling artists is a chapter in itself in the study of art history of the American continent. This category does not include the work of any individual who happens to travel to American lands and there dedicate himself to the trade of painter or drawer. The denomination is used specifically for those who use the singularities of the territories they visit as artistic subjects. In a broad sense, we could talk about a kind of

traveler art already from the first decades of the Iberian invasion to the lands overseas, particularly in the accounts or descriptions by colonists that included visual registers. This is the case, for instance, of the botanical and zoological studies by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, made and brought to the public in the first half of the 16th century. Also, during the Dutch occupation of part of the Luso-American territory in

the first half of the 17th century, a group of painters of traditional formation made a visual register of the land and its inhabitants with great meticulousness and notorious artistry. For this, the court of Prince Maurice of Nassau in Pernambuco is valued as a true traveling artistic enterprise. A third occasion in which arts and travels appear linked in American lands occurred when geopolitical needs and encyclopedic thirst led the European colonial potencies to explore their overseas domains with modern scientific tools, especially from the 18th century onwards. The crowns of Spain and Portugal saw themselves obliged to embark on expeditions for the reconnaissance of their new territories and the taking of possession of the colonial space; these included the construction of a vast and systematic visual repertory of plants, animals, the configuration of the land, rivers and outlines of the shore, and sometimes also native peoples.

However, from a strict point of view, when we refer to the category of travel art we do not allude to the notes of Oviedo, nor to the beautiful landscapes of the Dutchman Frans Post, nor to the stupendous botanical iconography produced, for example, under the conduction of José Celestino Mutis. The specific singularity of travel art, in comparison to other visual registers of the lands overseas, is defined by a modern esthetical attitude. This genre is sustained on a conceptual repertory conceived in mid-18th century, based on theoretical-philosophical speculation, especially that of Edmund Burke (1757) and Immanuel Kant (1764), with the theoretical-practical observations of the Anglican priest and essayist William Gilpin (1768 and 1789)¹ as direct reference.

The constitution of this genre was influenced in a decisive manner by the notable expansion of the classical concept of beauty, understood as harmony and proportionality, and the inclusion of the magnificent and the grandiose, which defined the esthetical category of the sublime. Somewhere in the long stretch between harmonic equilibrium and astonishing impact, that is to say, from the beautiful to the sublime, William Gilpin introduced the notion of picturesque. The range of senses that covers this concept is broad; it refers, among other things, to an esthetical ideal, an attitude of contemplation and also a type of travel.

In his *Essay II. On Picturesque Travel*, Gilpin writes: “We mean not to bring it [the picturesque travel] into competition with any of the more useful ends of travelling. But as many travel without any end at all, amusing themselves without being able to give a reason why they are amused, we offer one end, which may possibly engage some vacant minds; and may indeed afford a rational amusement to such as travel for more important purposes” (Gilpin, 2001: 41).

With a commanding tone and the ethical connotations suitable to an Anglican pastor, the author promotes a type of travel that pays attention to the picturesque beauties of the country. However, what

these beauties are is only superficially outlined. From the 18th century onwards, the practice of traveling incorporated these ideas and the travelers, especially Germans, Britons and Frenchmen, embarked on journeys along the length and breadth of their own countries or in the south of Europe and the Near East, initiated adventures to get to know more or less far-away lands, practicing the genre of picturesque travel.

For the European artists who traveled to America, the writings of Alexander von Humboldt became an instruction manual that included those ideas. Indeed, the genre of American travel art was forged in the circle of this Prussian scientist. In the first decades of the 19th century, it was defined with increasing precision, in a dialogue in which the travelers themselves intervened with their works; Humboldt regularly evaluated those works and the activity of diverse editorial houses, especially French, German and British, that decisively participated in the final modeling of the whole of visual registers made overseas and published in beautiful illustrated books.

In this text we address travel art in America from Mexico southwards. Broadly, the expressions of this genre in its fullest sense belong to the first two thirds of the 19th century; its gestation is linked to Humboldt’s American journey (1799–1804) and the forces that conducted it increasingly fade away with the spreading of photography, a moment that emblematically coincides with the death of the German scientist in 1859.

Any global study dedicated to this subject runs the risks inherent to an investigation with a body of analysis that is only known in fragments. To date, there are only few catalogues with the works of traveling artists, though this task is slowly being completed in the last two decades. An important contribution for this process of knowledge is a series of regional exhibition catalogues, where works of particular countries have been brought together.

Taking these limitations into account, this article proposes an analysis of the foundations of art and science that were the basis for travel art in the American continent, and offers a brief view of some themes that were developed with more emphasis.

THE PICTURESQUENESS OF TRAVEL ART

The publications of traveling artists are repeatedly labeled as picturesque works, and this can be seen in the titles of those books. The work of Johann Moritz Rugendas is entitled *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil* (Rugendas, 1827–1835), just like the large publication in three volumes by Jean Baptiste Debret published as *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* (Debret, 1834–1839); as for Mexico, Carl Nebel published *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la partie la plus intéressante du Mexique* (Nebel, 1836) and Jean Frédérick Waldeck, *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la province de Yucatan* (Waldeck, 1838).

Similarly, when Carl Nebel (1805–1855) describes the content of his book in the introduction of *Picturesque and archeological journey* dedicated to Mexico, he states “The New world, so rich in objects that are curious and interesting to Europeans, has repeatedly been visited by famous travelers, who have given us precious notions about statistics, natural history, etc., but, because of scorn or other reasons, these sirs have neglected the picturesque aspect of this country, which is no less interesting than the scientific part. Not everybody is a geographer, botanic, mineralogist, etc., but everybody is curious” (Nebel, 1836: Preface). And Alexander von Humboldt praises the attractiveness of this work in a journalistic article where he predicts that it “will satisfy all expectations, both from an archaeological as picturesque point of view” (Humboldt, 1835: 322).

For both of them, the picturesque belongs to a different sphere than the strictly scientific; it is rather related to curiosity, an interest of the public at large. This attribute is stressed in the ample themes shown in the 50 sheets of the book that illustrate the landscapes as well as the types of population, the view of cities and also archeological designs.

Certainly, in his conception, this work is not a casual or trivial miscellany but a fan of information about the most diverse aspects of existence that are of interest to modern man. As the editor Godefroy Engelmann stated a decade before Nebel, in 1826, when he launched subscriptions for Rugendas’ *Picturesque journey to Brazil*, “every cultured individual must feel the growing need, even the obligation, to know with increasing precision the world in which there are new interests every day, both from States as from individuals.” This is the task the editor attributes to the picturesque work he is about to publish: it contributes to the knowledge of “a world to which new hopes are aimed every day, a world that increasingly occupies a larger space in our minds, in our feelings, in our complete existence; a world that is increasingly more important for the man of State, for the studious man, for the merchant, in short for the man in general, in all circumstances” (Engelmann cit. by Diener and Costa, 2002: 93).

The meaning given to the picturesque in the qualification of these works is quite different from the one it had in its first sense, as it was used in the Italian artistic literature from the time of Giorgio Vasari in the *Cinquecento*, where the adjective *pittoresco* was applied to artistic subjects that were similar to pictorial compositions. However, if we go through the semantic changes this expression experienced in the course of two centuries, until it obtained the meaning used by Nebel, Humboldt and many other authors of the 19th century, we will see that it had variations derived from its initial use. This is especially true when applied to the description of parks and gardens and in the British tradition of gardening,

where it acquired a normative value, meaning that areas had to be conceived as a sequence of paintings.

From there on, William Gilpin transformed the term in a concept of art history, between the beautiful and the sublime.

Using the representation of landscapes as subject for his observations, Gilpin states that the search for the picturesque includes the sum of ingredients that compose his surroundings: “trees – rocks – broken grounds – woods – rivers – lakes – plains – vallies – mountains – and distances. These objects in themselves produce infinite variety”. Later on, variety is constructed through the combination of elements, and then also by the diverse interplays of light and shadows and other environmental effects (Gilpin, 2001: 42).

In his essays, this author insists on the diversity of the elements that attract the eye in the course of a picturesque travel. He refers to the human figure, which must be observed in its general aspect –its clothes and activities– and to animals and the pleasant impression a birds’ flight causes. And further on he emphatically stresses the interest relics of ancient architecture offer, which, in his opinion, deserve as much veneration as the works of nature themselves.

The artist’s hand intervenes precisely in the construction of a harmonious whole, based on variety, be it a park, garden or painting. The canons that define the models of picturesque perfection par excellence differ from one author to the next. The elegance of classicism promoted by Gilpin contrasts, for instance, with the passion for gothic ruins, for isolated rural cabins –preferably battered by storms– and with groups of country people, shown by Uvedale Price (1810).

There, one sees the pendular aspect of the picturesque as Gilpin tries to define it. “That we may examine picturesque objects with more care, it may be useful to class them into the sublime, and the beautiful”. The sublime, in itself, is not picturesque; “however grand the mountain, or the rock may be, it has no claim to this epithet, unless its form, its color, or its accompaniments have some degree of beauty. Nothing can be more sublime, than the ocean: but wholly unaccompanied, it has little of the picturesque” (Gilpin, 2001: 42–43).

The way in which the visited spaces would become picturesque was an issue that depended on the artist’s skill to model the new, the unheard-of, the startling, in sum, the sublime, according to the cannons of beauty.

In this task, cultured travelers were aided by touristic manuals, especially intended for Britons; artists were not only brought to places of interest, but the books also pointed out the specific spots from where the view was most similar to the esthetics of renowned painters. The most famous example of this type of manuals is *A Guide to the Lakes* by Tomas West (1778); it had no less than seven editions between 1778 and 1799. In this book, the author takes his readers to diverse surroundings and calls attention

on the evocations they cause, on occasions calling forth images by Claude Lorraine, others by Nicolas Poussin and still others by Salvator Rosa.

In this way, there emerged what Malcolm Andrews called “picturesque tourism as a controlled esthetical experience” (Andrews, 1995: 7), in which the traveler sets out towards surroundings far away from home, exposing himself to strange, sometimes intimidating landscapes. So the picturesque becomes a way to assimilate that experience, that is to say, to domesticate the unknown and reorganize the unstructured. Artistic language, through the esthetical concept of the picturesque, gives a tool for mediation, with which it is possible to rearrange reality according to predetermined canons.

One could hardly cite a universally valid definition for the picturesque. From its original meaning, which refers to the similarity with painting, it transformed and came to evoke that which entertains the eye and stimulates the senses of the onlooker. In a broad sense, picturesque became that which gives variety, diversity and irregularity. If Gilpin gave it a classicist meaning, towards 1800 it was more frequent to see it in relation with rustic, unsophisticated motifs.

The use of this adjective for that which is different and its use to translate the different into an artistic language surpassed the borders of Europe; it was also applied to the observation of motifs from the Islamic world, the Near East and gave birth to what we now call the artistic current of Orientalism. In the same manner, the artistic interpretation of the landscape and in general of the American world by European artistic travelers was modeled step by step, with the picturesque as an important reference. And the diffusion and general acceptance of this esthetical principle made it possible for their works to be recognized in erudite spheres too.

Engelmann implicitly invokes the mediating role of picturesque art to seduce possible subscribers for the book about Brazil he is about to print with the drawings of Rugendas. Nebel and Humboldt also refer to this aspect of the picturesque when they accentuate the thematic diversity organized in an elaborate manner in the book about Mexico. These characters, and in general traveler art in all, worked to create bridges of understanding between Europe and the American world, an artistic adventure that needed the creation of a language for the representation of American landscape and man.

NORM AND FORM AMONG TRAVELING ARTISTS IN AMERICA

In his classic compilation of studies *Norm and Form. Studies in the art of Renaissance*, Gombrich (1966) challenges the traditional statement that art is always opposed to systematic thought. Without diminishing the creativity of artists, the author proves that that creativity can only flourish in a determinate

environment, which exerts an enormous influence on the resulting works of art. This analysis by the famous art historian about the relation between Renaissance art theory and practice gives us some approaches to study the genre of travel art; specifically the environment created towards the beginning of the 19th century in the field of Americanist investigations thanks to the presence and imposing personality of Alexander von Humboldt and the influence of his vast work.

From the first decade of the 19th century onwards, Humboldt tackled issues of the picturesque representation of American nature and landscape. Specifically in the *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (Humboldt and Bonpland, 1805), when he comments the *Tableau physique des Andes et Pays voisins* included in that publication and referring to the synoptic conception of that representation, he observes that “A drawing like this, for its own nature subject to scale, is not likely to be made in a very picturesque manner, because a painting that demands geometrical exactness ceases to give the eye pleasure.” Some lines below, he insists on this topic: “Some persons of delicate taste would perhaps have preferred all observations to appear in the scale of the limits of the painting, but since in a work of this type one needs to conciliate as far as possible two opposite interests (which is not easy), which are effect and exactness, it is up to the public to decide if we have overcome the hardships inherent to the realization of such a work.” (Humboldt and Bonpland, 1805: 46–47).

These observations, that show the specific concern of the Prussian scientist with the visual register of nature, are complemented five years later with ideas about the artistic representation of monuments of the peoples’ history, when he publishes *Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (Humboldt, 1816). The edition with 69 prints was initially planned as an American *Atlas pittoresque*, and an appendix to the narrative about his journey between 1799 and 1804 (Puig-Samper and Rebok, 2010). But with the passing of years, it gained autonomy and was finally structured as a monumental work in which images interact with specific texts, in an erudite and seductive combination of art and literature.

In the first sentence of the introduction, Humboldt expounds the object of this book, affirming that in it he has gathered “whatever relates to the origin and first progress of the arts among the natives of America” (Humboldt, 1816, I: 7). However, further on he explains that in this work he includes views of the monuments of the indigenous peoples and of the “picturesque spots” they have inhabited, and he justifies this combination arguing that “one cannot deny that the weather, the configuration of the soil, the physiognomy of vegetables, the look of a happy or wild nature influence the progress of the art and style that distinguishes their productions” (Humboldt,

1816, I: 48). In the commentaries to the prints, he once and again analyses the landscapes, defining them as essentially picturesque. His description of “Fall of the Tequendama” serves as an archetype of his point of view. It is not the waterfall in itself that gives this place a picturesque attractiveness, nor the volume of the torrent or the height from which it falls, but the stupendous diversity of the vegetation, and he concludes his argument with a comparison that clarifies his idea well: “the Niagara falls would be even more beautiful if, instead of being in a northern zone in an area of pines and holm oaks, it were surrounded by heliconia, palm trees and arborescent ferns” (Humboldt, 1816, I: 91).

As richness and variety of forms gives a landscape the desired characteristics, making it an eminently picturesque motif, Humboldt conceives his book initially as a picturesque atlas precisely in accordance with thematic diversity. *Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* are paintings of culture, according to Ette (2008). In their complexity, they compose a kaleidoscopic whole that is a counterpoint to the paintings of nature. This combination of views of the landscape and registers and motifs of the peoples' life acquired the meaning of a category in the approach to the American world Humboldt promoted among traveling artists. Indeed, it was precisely with this connotation –of paintings of nature and history– that Humboldt evaluated and praised the picturesque and archaeological book about Mexico by Nebel.

The use of the term picturesque is polysemic, but it maintained its coherence for more than half a century when applied to the work of travelers, and it served as a script for the practice of itinerary artists. In Humboldt's thought it refers, in part, to a comprehension of the landscape that satisfies artistic expectations in a paradigmatic manner, according to the esthetical cannons from Edmund Burke to William Gilpin, but enriched in its content with a poetical combination of art and science. It also implies a broad thematic spectrum, where observations of the natural world not only alternate, but also interact with historical-cultural aspects.

In landscape painting, Humboldt's ideas had the greatest diffusion and were even valued as explicit instructions. In that field, the naturalist defined tropical areas as the subject that would allow that genre to develop spectacularly, considering it was a space where artists would find the richest concentration of motifs for their creative work, a statement he explains with the study of vegetation distribution in the different climatic zones. From an esthetical perspective, two large groups of plants are particularly relevant, differentiated by the author according to their distribution on the face of the earth. It is decisive if, in a certain territory, vegetal species are present en masse or alone, that is to say, if they develop in a social manner, in extensive groups of one single species, or if

they grow isolated and scattered, not together with individuals of their same species. The fact that in tropical latitudes plants that grow isolated are predominant makes those landscapes infinitely more attractive, with more diversity; on the other hand, in temperate zones where social plants are predominant, the look of the landscape is more homogenous, more monotonous and therefore less picturesque.

Scientific knowledge becomes an essential factor for the understanding of the landscape, even from the perspective of its artistic register. However, Humboldt also ascribes an important role to creative intuition in the process of an integral reproduction of nature, and with a view to promote his study. He makes a thorough analysis of this topic in the second part of *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (Humboldt, 1866), where he sums up ideas developed since his return from his travel to America –developed in his publications and the vast iconographic body that goes with them, in his correspondence with a group of German artists, and also in several writings in which he comments on the work of traveling artists of all Europe.

His proposal is based on the principle that the picturesque is in nature itself, in its richness, contrasts and –therein lays his emphasis– in its coherence, and therefore it must be constructed with elements of nature. In this aspect, precisely, there is an innovation from the formulations of Gilpin; the issue is settled in the identification of what gives a motif a picturesque character.

In a part of his travel descriptions, the British pastor stops at the town of Tintern and describes how the vegetation has taken over the ruins of the abbey, giving it what he calls “ornaments of time”. The language he uses is similar to the one we find later on in Humboldt; the mere mention of fine-sounding names of plants seemingly aims to seduce: “ivy, in masses uncommonly large, had taken possession of many parts of the wall; and gives a happy contrast to the grey-coloured stone, [...]. Nor was this undecorated. Mosses of various hues, with lichens, maiden-hair, penny-leaf, and other humble plants, had over-spread the surface; [...] all together they give those full-blown tints, which add the richest finishing to a ruin.” (Gilpin, 1783: 39–40).

Here, the contrast, the picturesque itself, emerges from the opposition of ruins and vegetation. For Gilpin, this esthetical category tends to be expressed when he finds an encounter of elements from two or more aspects of reality, or when the pictorial conception evokes ideas that go beyond the mere visual experience.

So, the opposition to Humboldt's viewpoint is not founded on his postulation of naturalism to the letter. Far from it, the esthetical world of the author of *Cosmos* is defined based on identification with classicist tradition;² he always thought of a painting of nature with ideal connotations. Thus, when he

makes a historic recount of the representation of landscapes, he expresses his admiration for Titian, for being the first one to go beyond what he calls “a careful but almost timid imitation of nature” (Humboldt, 1866, II: 87–88).

Humboldt never had any intention for traveling artists to make strictly naturalist views, but he suggested that painters make compositions that included everything that could appear in a given environment. In *Cosmos* he writes about the equilibrium between imitation and invention: “Landscape painting, though not simply an imitative art, has a more material origin and a more earthly limitation. It requires for its development a large number of various and direct impressions, which, when received from external contemplation, must be fertilized by the powers of the mind, in order to be given back to the senses of others as a free work of art. The grander style of heroic landscape painting is the combined result of a profound appreciation of nature and of this inward process of the mind” (Humboldt, 1866, II: 94–95).

The transformation, or intellectual elaboration he refers to, gives us the key to his understanding of this artistic genre. “Every zone of vegetation has, besides its own attractions, a peculiar character, which calls forth in us special impressions. Referring here only to our own native plants, I would ask, who does not feel himself variously affected beneath the somber shade of the beech, on hills crowned with scattered pines, or in the midst of grassy plains, where the wind rustles among the trembling leaves of the birch? As in different organic beings we recognize a distinct physiognomy, and as descriptive botany and zoology are, in the strict definition of the words, merely analytic classifications of animal and vegetable forms, so there is also a certain physiognomy of nature exclusively peculiar to each portion of the earth. [. . .] To apprehend these characteristics, and to reproduce them visibly, is the province of landscape painting” (Humboldt, 1866, II: 97).

The composition of a landscape painting must have the coherence of physiognomic representations of nature as central purpose, a principle derived from geographical physics. This discipline was conceived already before the journey to America and marks a milestone in Humboldt’s scientific thought. And in the introduction to *Relation historique du Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (Humboldt and Bonpland, 1814–1825) it is mentioned as the science that guided his observation of the American continent.

Under this theoretical and methodological approach, geographical phenomena, especially the life of plants, is analyzed and reproduced as the result of the interaction of all elements of nature. The interaction of the diverse variables of geography determines the configuration of the landscape. The artist must become conscious of this discovery of knowledge, and

in this way, scientific knowledge becomes necessary for his activity; based on it, he will be able to build verisimilar, plausible landscapes.

So, the task consisted of representing a space with all the conditions inherent to the different geographical factors and with everything it could contain in optimal conditions. In this way, the painter was not a slave of whatever existed at a given moment, but a creator of what could be. Based on scientific knowledge, the artist can and must complete his work with everything a landscape could include, following the premises of physical geography.

The deep contemplation and intellectual elaboration based on scientific knowledge would take the artist—according to this approach—on a road of certain creation, as long as he identifies the physiognomic archetypes of nature. In this formulation, the concept of model has different connotations to the ones we find in Gilpin. The traveling artist does not express his experiences imitating other painters or getting inspiration from someone else’s work. Science helps him understand and organize different realities.

The way in which the fruits of knowledge are manifested in a visual language, generating new modalities of artistic perception and register, has been analyzed for different periods in art history. Erwin Panofsky (1927) for instance, revealed the strong relationship during the Renaissance between mathematical rationalization of space and its unitary, coherent and infinite representation, attained through the use of central perspective. This instrument gave a new concept of infinity to the visual arts, which was no longer the result of divine prefiguration, but of empirical reality. And Charlotte Klonk (1997) investigated a phenomenon more close to our issue, in her work about the representations of the geological configuration of the island of Staffa, a rock over basaltic formations in the west coast of Scotland. Indeed, as Klonk mentions, Staffa was the subject of numerous studies, and as a consequence of the fieldwork of geology, representations of the place change substantially between 1790 and 1830. Initially, there were mostly descriptions and images that show admiration for a marvel of creation and that highlight the bizarre character of the basaltic columns of the island. Towards the end of the period, that focus loses force and the rocks were seen from the perspective of natural history. In other words, geological knowledge was an important factor for the emergence of a new way of seeing and drawing or painting the rock, what Klonk calls a “*phenomenalist* mode of representation” (Klonk, 1997: 205).

When we observe the appropriation of the category of picturesque by European artists in America, we verify that Humboldt’s physical geography was the discipline that provided a new way of conceiving the artistic subject. Archetypes are conceived as a typology of the landscape. With attentive contemplation, the traveler understands the type of landscape he is

confronted with, according to the instructions by the author of *Essai sur la géographie des plantes*. Once he identifies it, and blends with its system, he can reprocess and compose it freely, deducing everything that belongs to it from the coherence of this environment he has already internalized.

So, when planning a composition, the artist will frequently reuse the more traditional resources of the picturesque, evoking once and again the composition forms of Claude Lorraine, other times, those of Jacob Ruysdael, and still others, those of Nicolas Poussin.

In this effort to define models for the American landscape, the first work that acquired a paradigmatic value was the aquarelle *Forêt vierge du Brésil* (1819) by the Count de Clarac (1777–1847) (figure 1), based on observations made of nature during a journey to Rio de Janeiro in 1816. The sheet was exhibited in the *Salon* of Paris of 1819 and engraved on a copper sheet in 1822. So, it was an image with wide distribution, and, moreover, enthusiastically praised by Humboldt: “nothing compares to the sentiment of truth” –he writes in *Tableaux de la Nature*– “with which Mr. de Clarac has been able to draw on paper the majestic and varied forms of the Torrid Zone” (Humboldt, 1828, II: 148).

As the title of the image indicates, the place is indeterminate, but its generic, typological identification belongs to the flora of the Atlantic and is unequivocal thanks to the vegetation the author

includes in the representation. The diversity of the represented plants is extraordinary; and, as a whole, the image is constructed with strong contrasts of light and dark that are the result of two essential elements: the trunk of an enormous tree that casts a dark shadow in the foreground, and a stream with waters reflecting the rays of the sun that penetrate the dense forest through a clearing, a light beam the enormous trunk hides from the onlooker. The combination of immensity, darkness and grandiosity –all the more impressive before the presence of tiny natives crossing the stream– are unequivocal references to the idea of the sublime, that is to say, of a nature that imposes itself relentlessly before man’s insignificance. So, to the exactitude of naturalist description, Clarac increases the emotional element, putting in practice esthetical categories formulated from the mid-18th century onwards and reoriented by Humboldt for the expression of the American world.

The naturalist knowledge constructed by the scientist from Berlin and his theoretical writings about the genre of landscape painting contributed to create the intellectual climate Gombrich refers to as an important factor for the development of traveling art. Those ideas took root, to the point that some painters decided to visually illustrate Humboldt’s understanding of natural life with their work.

The artist from Augsburg Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802–1858) wrote the editor Johann Friedrich von



FIGURE 1. Count de Clarac (1819), *Forêt vierge du Brésil* [pen and watercolor on paper]. In *Le comte de Clarac et la Forêt vierge du Brésil*, edited by Correa do Lago, P. and Frank, L. (2005). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Cotta with this purpose in February, 1831, shortly before embarking on the great American journey, from Mexico all through the continent to Cape Horn. He proposes to make a work, scientific in character, in which he would represent the “Basic forms of plants”, according to the classification by Humboldt, and suggests a publication of 40 to 50 prints, in which the plants would appear grouped in a natural manner, registered in their own environment, in the Mexican territory from Veracruz to the central plains of the Andes (Rugendas cit. by Löschner, 1976: 183). Though Cotta was not seduced by this proposal, the artist did not receive the desired financing for his artistic overseas adventure and the work never became a reality, when one goes through the works of Rugendas we can see that these words, more than a mere circumstantial idea, are the reflection of a deep conviction about the purpose of his task.

A little over a decade later, the German traveler Albert Berg (1825–1884) did manage to complete a similar project. Based on the studies he made during a journey to Colombia, in 1849–1850, Berg published a map with a selection of 13 views under the evocative title of *Physiognomie der tropischen Vegetation Süd-America's* (Berg, 1854). Regardless of the fact that it is a more modest project than that of Rugendas, his initiative unequivocally responds to the intention of creating an iconographic repertory to represent the variations of the landscape, according to the changes of natural forms, while following the river Magdalena upstream into the Andean heights. In a letter to the artist –published as presentation of the lithographic sheets– Humboldt praised the work as an accomplished materialization of the principles of the physical geography he proclaimed.

TRAVEL AND TRAVELERS

Just like the British travelers at the end of the 18th century, who in their quest for picturesque motifs sought guidance in manuals like that of Thomas West –that indicated localities and even the most adequate spots of observations–, European traveling artists also plunged into the adventure of traveling through American lands armed with a roadmap. Of course, the itineraries of one and another were relatively well contrasted, in part because travel conditions differed, in part because their expectations and objectives diverged. However, on each side of the Atlantic, the development of the systematic knowledge of geography and peoples defined the milestones for the routes of traveling artists.

In the case of travel itineraries for the American continent there is a series of essentially curious motifs, that frequently reappear in the largest part of the images left by traveling painters, be it in the panoramic views of Guanabara bay in Rio de Janeiro, the views of Lima from the other side of the Rimac river or the profile of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl as

seen from the valley of Mexico. But, beyond the inclusion of those clichés we would now call touristic, an important factor that helped define the routes for traveling artists in America were the scientific expeditions of the Enlightenment; these made the existence of noteworthy places known.

The guiding thread in every tour, that is to say the travel route, is one of the factors that allow us to discern traces of the intellectual horizon of every artist. This is particularly useful in the case of painters and drawers where there is a large diversity, from the accidental traveler –be it a military, diplomat or business man who dedicates his free time to the arts– to the academic painter who leaves his studio to work outside or in search of motifs to capture on the canvas. And, surely enough, at the focus of attention we find the archetypical personality of this trade: the artist who dedicates himself for some years, and sometimes even for all his lifetime, to traveling and painting or drawing and, if he can, to publishing his works in illustrated books.

The specific feature that encompasses the work of all these travelers under a common denominator is the intention of the registers they make. Their immediate antecedent is the scientific illustrator who accompanies study expeditions to the most remote places of the planet. But this antecedent is also a model to exceed. The traveling artist of the Romanticism, either professional or amateur, rethinks more or less consciously the relationship with science from an idealist perspective and intuits that his registers are not merely servile illustrations. He sees himself as someone who is able to penetrate, from a subjective perspective, in a profound comprehension of man and nature. Through an artistic language modeled by the esthetical premises elaborated in collusion with science, particularly the work of Alexander von Humboldt, everything that is different is domesticated in accordance with his own sensibility.

So, when we tackle the art of travelers in the American continent in the 19th century, we must think of a broad spectrum. The core is defined by the body of works produced by professional artists. Many of them have personal ties with Humboldt, like Ferdinand Bellermann (1814–1889), who travels to Venezuela (figure 2), Albert Berg, who visits Colombia, and Johann Moritz Rugendas, who covers a large part of Latin America; others, like Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768–1848), who produced an enormous oeuvre about Brazil, has intellectual affinity with Humboldt's assumptions, though he does not have a personal relationship with the German scientist. But in this spectrum we must also consider less ample and erudite registers, like the drawings of local customs by the Swiss merchant Lukas Vischer (1780–1840) in Mexico, the landscapes of Chile and Brazil by the Englishwoman Mary Graham (1785–1842) and the architectural sketches of several Peruvian cities by the French diplomat Leonce Angrand (1808–1886).



FIGURE 2. Ferdinand Bellermann (ca. 1845), *Tree ferns in Galipan* [pen on paper]. In *Kunst um Humboldt. Reisestudien aus Mittel und Südamerika*, edited by Achenbach, Sigrid (2009) Hirmer Verlag, Munich.

Some are renowned personalities in the history of art, others simply produced charming images, though of a minor artistic value; but in all of them we glimpse the same intention, of capturing the continent according to modern canons of travel, observation and registers.

Brazil is one of the main focuses of attention, a country that was seen foremost as the quintessence of the gifts nature offers to humanity. In this space, *Forêt vierge du Brésil* by the Count de Clarac became a model that served persistently as source of inspiration. His modality of registering and composition of the virgin forest reappears in landscapes, like in *Forêt du Brésil* (oil on canvas, 1830) by Rugendas, in *Vallée situé au centre des gorges de la Serra do Mar* (lithography, 1834) by Debret and the wash drawing by the Belgian diplomat Benjamin Mary (1792–1846), *The largest trees at the banks of Topirambarana, in the Amazonas* (pen and wash drawing on paper, ca. 1837–38) (figure 3), that was lithographed later on for the “Physiognomic Tables” in *Flora Brasiliensis* by C.F.Ph. von Martius, under the name of *Arbores ante Christum natum enatae, in silva juntam fluvium Amazonum* [Trees born before the Christian era, on

the shores of the Amazonas river] (lithography, 1841). But it also served as foundation to conceive backcloths for fantastic scenes about the life of natives, like in the painting by François Auguste Biard (1798–1882), *Les indiens de l’amazonie adorant le Dieu Soleil* (oil on canvas, ca. 1860).

This type of images of the interior of the forests, be it in the Atlantic Forest or the area of the Amazonas, was to be considered the Brazilian landscape par excellence. And its visual representation perfectly responds to the criteria of the picturesque, both because of its infinite diversity of flowers, and because the interior of the dense vegetation was shown as an intimidating and imposing environment, that is to say, sublime, because of its superhuman dimensions and reduced luminosity, always sifted by the crowns of the trees. This territory was a motif that presented many of the challenges a traveling artist wished to have to face.

Just like the views of the tropical lush groves were valued as a trace of identity of Brazil, in the eyes of the traveling artists the silhouettes of volcanoes were an emblematic motif of the Mexican landscape. The



FIGURE 3. Benjamin Mary (ca. 1837–1838), *The largest trees at the banks of Topirambarana, in the Amazonas* [pen and wash drawing on paper]. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

curiosity these mountains of fire awoke went beyond their mere inclusion as outstanding elements of the landscape; the volcanoes were meticulously observed during arduous excursions. We know in detail, for example, about the climbing of the Popocatepetl by the French diplomat and fine painter Jean Baptiste Louis, Barón Gros (1793–1870), together with the professional British painter Daniel Thomas Egerton (1797–1842) and the Prussian consul Friedrich von Geroldt. There are still oil paintings from the first two; the studies of volcanic rocks in *Popocatepetl, Peak of the Friar* (oil on paper, 1834) by Gros and *Crater of the Popocatepetl* (oil on canvas, 1834) by Egerton (figure 4).³ These works denote an incisive look of the volcano as a geological phenomenon. For his part, Rugendas made a sort of peregrination to the series of

volcanoes in the strip close to 19°N, the so-called Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. Locations from Orizaba, in Sierra Madre Oriental, through Popocatepetl and Toluca in the limits of the valley of Mexico, to Jorullo and Colima in the west, are to be found in his drawings and studies in oil, and he dedicated long excursions to the latter two in company of the military strategist and cartographical expert Eduard Harkort, who calls those climbs “scientific travels” (Harkort cit. by Diener, 2011: 57–58).

The fact that Humboldt dedicated special attention to Mexico and can be considered his favorite in America, consolidated this country as a seductive destiny for the expeditions of traveling artists. We need only recall that more than half the prints of *Vues*



FIGURE 4. Daniel Thomas Egerton, (1834) *Crater of the Popocatepetl* [oil on canvas]. Fundación Cultural Banamex, Mexico City.

des Cordillères (Humboldt, 1816) are about Mexican issues. And from these, a large part show pre-Hispanic motifs. This contributed to guide the interests of travels of the 19th century in Mexico; indeed, we identified a considerable group of drawers and painters whose work fits with the tradition of registering pre-Hispanic traces, which started during colonial administration. The personalities that acquired most fame with their works in this field are, among others, the British entrepreneur William Bullock (1770–1849), the German artist Maximilian Franck (ca. 1780–1830), the Bohemian artist and archaeologist Jean Frédéric Waldeck (1766–1875), the German Carl Nebel and the British drawer Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854).

Their activity is very dissimilar and covers a range that goes from the careful registering of archaeological pieces –like in the work of Franck– to the mounting of exhibitions about *Ancient Mexico* aimed to the large public, as Bullock did in London, which included the fabrication of copies in plaster and, at the end of his project, the commercialization of the exhibited pieces.

Certainly, the most remarkable of all these personalities is Waldeck, a bold artist who, just before reaching 60 years of age, embarked alone and with very little funds on a journey to Palenque. He allowed himself all types of liberties to interpret the monuments he visited, sometimes completing them, but almost always sensitively capturing their geographical surrounding. Just like Nebel and Catherwood did more discreetly, he created images loaded with subjectivity and emotion, inviting the spectator to unveil the historical meaning of those remains (figure 5).

One theme that is constantly present in the length and breadth of the whole continent is the studies or notes about the population. In its most modest form, they appear as little decorating figures, livening urban or rural views or as a mere reference element for scale; but in general they stand out in the works of travelers, who registered the execution of tasks or popular celebrations, that is, the most diverse moments of daily life. Besides this range of images of ample assortment, there is also a series of quite systematic typologies, determined to identify categories in the population. Because of their systematization, these registers of human types come close to the illustrations that accompany taxonomical studies in the field of naturalism.

The first of these groups was created in Mexico by the Italian Claudio Linati (1790–1832), and culminated with the publication of the album *Costumes civils, militaires et religieux du Mexique* (Linati, 1828). Approximately one decade later, Rugendas set out on a similar task in Chile. Probably inspired by the Mexican work of Linati, he made more than a hundred studies of the Chilean popular typology, registering individuals from the rural, mining and urban population (figure 6). This series was also conceived for diffusion in a publication that, planned in several deliveries, would bear the title *Album de trajes chilenos*; but from the vast collection of drawings, only one single notebook with five lithographs would see the public light (Santiago de Chile, 1838). And even in the 1850s we can see a similar initiative in Colombia. Commissioned by the government of that country, the Italian geographer Agustín

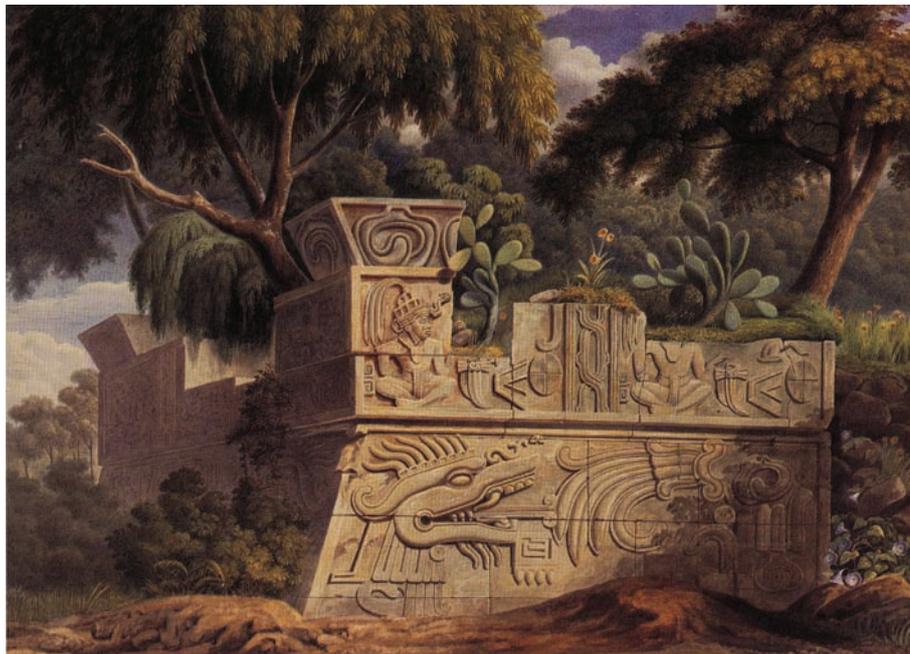


FIGURE 5. Jean Frédéric Waldeck, (ca. 1829) *The pyramid of Xochicalco* [watercolor on paper]. In *Viajeros europeos del siglo XIX en México*, edited by Diener, P. (1996). Fomento Cultural Banamex, Mexico City.



FIGURE 6. Johann Moritz Rugendas, (1836) *Carretero* [pen on paper]. At: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München.

Codazzi carried out an expedition, the *Chorographic Commission* that covered the national territory with the task to create a visual catalogue of the regions and their populations. Although it was a national enterprise, the works of the *Chorographic Commission* show a close connection with the work of traveling artists and, in fact, of the three illustrators. Manuel María Paz (1820–1902) was born in Venezuela, Carmelo Fernández (1810–1887) in Colombia and the third, Enrique Price (1819–1863), was a Briton. Obvious is the political purpose of this typological register of the population, following socio-economical and regional criteria, with a view to the administrative organization of the young Republic (Manthorne, 2008).

The collections of themes change their focus as we move along the continent. Just like in Mexico, the Andean region also strongly attracted the interest of artists who tried to capture pre-Hispanic remnants, although their registers do not carry such an evident emotional richness as we see in Waldeck. In Brazil, studies of the population had different characteristics from that of the genre of local customs and manners predominant in Latin America. There, iconography was closer to investigations of physical anthropology and incipient cultural ethnography. At the same time, the studies of landscape also necessarily respond to the

singularities of each region. The Andes mountain range seduced painters, from Chile to Ecuador, to create series of geomorphological studies in a picturesque language –like the work Rugendas dedicated to the mountain range in the Chilean-Argentinean border–, or paintings of the large volcanoes of Ecuador that captivated Humboldt and continued to attract the attention of such remarkable painters as Ernesto Charton de Treville (1818–1878) and Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900). But even in the interior of the South American continent, timid sketches appear of a landscape that intends to capture territories dominated not by mountain ranges, but by gigantic river courses, like the views of the Paraguay and Paraná River basins, made by artists of the expeditions of the Russian-German Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (1825–1828) and the Frenchman Francis de Castelnau (1843–1847).

The work of the traveling artists of the 19th century in Latin America composes a *grand tour* through the continent. It was motivated by an urge for knowledge, in which the protagonists, that is to say painters and drawers, embarked on an adventure to capture and interpret the sensitive reality of far-away lands. Using a sophisticated epistemological model in which art and science are embedded, an image of American nature and peoples emerged, composed by thousands of

pencil sketches, aquarelles, etchings and oil paintings. In this image, landscape is more than the sum of plants and rocks; men and women, even when they are represented alone, compose collectivities to which an historical sense needs to be attributed; and the traces or ruins of a more or less distant past, even when seen in fragments, receive new breaths of life.

The traveling artist lives in the hope of giving meaning to what he sees, and longs for his artistic subject and cause of his sleepless nights to sometime reveal its secrets to him. “It is the expectation of new scenes,” Christopher Hussey writes, “perhaps the ideal scene, opening to his view, that sets him off and keeps him going” (Hussey, 1927: 83). But, in fact, that ideal scene never manifests before his eyes and in the course of the journey he is the one who has had to construct the interpretation of his experiences. In that process, he imbued a strong emotional charge to the land and the men he visited and recorded, creating views and visions that emotionally involve the spectators of his works. Through that path, the genre of travel art intervened in the construction of the idea of America that forged the 19th century.

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NOTES

1. William Gilpin’s most widespread work was *An Essay upon prints* (Gilpin, 1768); in 1789 he published a reworked version of his ideas in *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (see Gilpin, 2001).
2. For the esthetical filiation of Alexander von Humboldt, see Diener (1999).
3. There is a meticulous account of the climb of the Popocatepetl in a cyanotype of 1866 by Gros, that contains a text made for the publications of the *Scientific commission of Mexico* (Archives Nationales de France, code F/17/2914/2); the narrative was never published.

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