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Interrelationships Between Landscape Art and Geography in Latin America

There is a long tradition of artistic feeling in geography. For decades, geographers have emphasized the usefulness of landscape painting in the study of places. Alexander von Humboldt was motivated by this sense when he persuaded artists to travel to Latin America in the nineteenth century. More recently, John Leighly (1937) remarked that art provides the largest body of instructive material available to the student of cultural landscapes. Meinig (1971) reiterates this theme in his appeal for a humane geography of environmental appreciation. And, as Ronald Rees (1973, 149) has stated,

“Landscape paintings, if cautiously interpreted, are an invaluable source for the historical geographer, and one that ought to be tapped more consistently.”

Rees, Meinig, Leighly, and Humboldt offer a challenge and an opportunity to investigate the relationships between art and geography in a Latin American context. The investigation begins at the time of European contact with the New World.

In the Age of Discovery, the New World was an incredible place. To early Spanish explorers, including Columbus, Pizarro and Cortes, Latin America appeared as nothing less than a tantalizing mirage, unbelievable but true.¹ Even the crusty old soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the chronicler of Cortes' march into Mexico, relates that

“With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes.” (Díaz del Castillo, 1963, 216).

Most Northern Europeans, barred from entering the new lands, were particularly fascinated by them. For many years, works of imagination by such noted authors as Spencer, Bacon, and Milton substituted for real evidence of life there. Because of the Europeans' preoccupation with the exotic and unusual aspects of the New World as well as Spain's exclusionary policy, Latin America remained shrouded in mystery during the Conquest and much of the Colonial period. The few accounts of early travelers catered to the Northern Europeans' thirst for information but

hardly quenched it. A powerful sense of mystery persisted.

The famous German geographer Baron Alexander von Humboldt was one of the first Northern Europeans to penetrate the mystery of Latin America (James, 1972; Botting, 1973). Humboldt, a Prussian aristocrat, had long exhibited a great curiosity about the New World and all other unfamiliar places. His position in society afforded him an audience with the Spanish Prime Minister and then the King and Queen, who granted him permission to visit the Spanish colonies in Latin America beginning in 1799.

Humboldt did not squander his good fortune. He and his companion, Aimé Bonpland, a French botanist, traveled to Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba, returning to Europe via the United States in 1804. His observations and experiences produced thirty volumes of reportorial and interpretative field studies (von Humboldt, 1805-1834) that brought him universal acclaim, but he was not satisfied that he had delivered the true vision of Latin America to his contemporaries in Northern Europe. That, he believed, was a job for an artist.

The German geographer was unable to take an illustrator with him on his journey to the New World, but on his return Humboldt encouraged skilled artists to travel there in order to produce and offer to Europe an accurate picture of Latin America. Among the European artists touched by Humboldt's proselytism were Ferdinand Bellermann, Edward Hildebrandt, and Johann Moritz Rugendas (Honour, 1975, 268).

The young Johann Rugendas, representing the ninth generation of artists in his family in Bavaria, was well prepared by talent, training, and experience to accept Humboldt's challenge (Thieme and Becker, 1935, 181; Lago, 1960; Richert, 1952). He received his formal education in art from his father, Director of the Augsburg Academy, and in schools in Munich. Moreover, he had prior field experience in Latin America.

Rugendas had first gone to South America in 1821 at the age of nineteen as a draftsman for the expedition of the Russian Consul General in Berlin, the Baron Georg Heinrich von Langsdorf. He returned from Brazil in 1823 with a large collection of drawings that Humboldt saw and admired. Humboldt was impressed with the artist's competence and attention to detail, especially with regard to vegetation, and encouraged the publication of about a hundred of Rugendas'

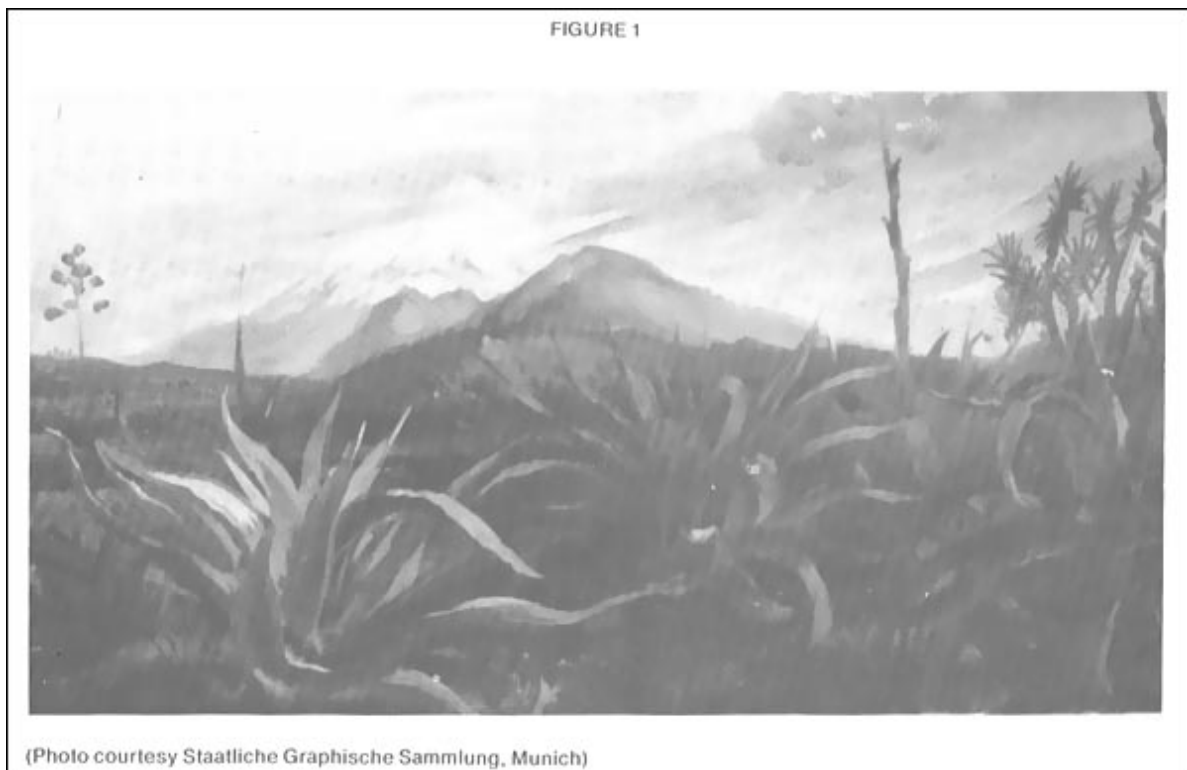
lithographs in a book titled *Voyage pittoresque dans le Bresel* (Rugendas, 1827-1835).

With the proceeds from the sale of this book Rugendas was able to study briefly in Italy and then, further encouraged by Humboldt, returned to Latin America in 1831. There he produced sketches and paintings that were particularly successful in conveying the spirit and substance of the Latin American landscape.

Rugendas is the best-known personality in the wave of nineteenth century painters to take special interest in New World *costumbrista* painting, a reportorial art designed to portray the actual social and physical environment of the region (Catlin and Greider, 1966, 13). These painters traversed Latin America for about fifty years during the 1800s, producing art that not only recorded the landscapes of this era but also introduced new techniques of Romantic art to Latin American artists. According to art historians Catlin and Greider,

This art had a formative influence on European conceptions of Latin American life and society, and it also seems likely that through printed reproductions it had a similar influence on Latin American conceptions of itself (Catlin and Greider, 1966, 13).

Rugendas first went to Mexico, where he lived from 1831 to 1834. Here he produced about 1700 drawings, watercolors, and oils, including the famous "Distant View of Orizaba" (Figure 1). Most of his work here reflects his preoccupation with the physiognomy of plants and the structure of mountains; it also illustrates the development of his remarkable ability to evoke the atmosphere of the places he painted.



From his Mexican sketches were prepared the engravings for a book by Christian Sartorius, called in English, *Mexico: Landscapes and Popular Sketches* (Sartorius, 1855). With the publication of this book, Rugendas' reputation for excellence was established.

He left Mexico in 1834, sailing for Chile. Rugendas remained there for 12 years except for short visits to Argentina (1837-1838) as well as Peru and Bolivia (1842-1844). The friendly and competent artist proved equally as productive in South America as in Mexico, and influenced the work of others, including Auguste Borget and Robert Krause (James, 1955). In Chile, he exercised his full powers as a Romantic artist. As Catlin and Greider relate,

These were his productive years: drawings and watercolors of Araucanian Indian life and of all aspects of Latin American life served as the basis for important oils. His style is almost a definition of the Romantic style, full of contrasts of light and color and dashing in action, concentrating on the exotic life around him (Catlin and Greider, 1966, 194).

An example of his preoccupation with light and form is Rugendas' "Bivouac in the Chilean Andes" (Figure 2). Johann Rugendas' works, as those of his more famous European contemporaries Eugene Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, illustrate the Romantic's involvement with nature and passion

for optical truth that result in great emotional power. Many also are invaluable representations of people and landscape. As Smith (1942, 106) relates of Rugendas' pencil drawing "A Young Estanciero," done in Argentina,



“Such a drawing is an important document of local social history. It records a whole way of life that still continues in Argentina.”

After returning to Europe the artist was unable to find support for publication of his works in Paris or Augsburg, but in 1847 he presented over 3,000 drawings and paintings to the King of Bavaria in return for an annuity. Rugendas died in 1858, "in illness and discouragement, and with longings for America" (Catlin and Greider, 1966, 195). Most of his art is now held by the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich.

In the years since his death, the works of Rugendas have been praised not only for their artistic style but also for their faithful reproduction of actual scenes in Latin America. These

qualities render them suitable for geographic study, and present the opportunity to investigate some interrelationships between geography and landscape art.

How may Rugendas' contribution to Latin American art and geography be analyzed? The noted art critic Sir Kenneth Clark suggests an avenue of approach, the use of three elements: the sociological, philosophical, and artistic elements of style.

According to Clark,

“The landscape of fact, like all portraiture, is a bourgeois form of art.

Seventeenth-century Holland was the great, we may say, the heroic epoch of bourgeoisie, and its art reflected the desire to see portrayed recognizable experiences. ...And the Dutch felt the need of recognizable, unidealized views of their own country, the character of which they had recently fought so hard to defend” (Clark, 1961, 29).

The same feelings and needs were evident throughout Latin America from 1831 to 1847, when Rugendas was there. This was an age of strife (Herring, 1961, 243-292). Warfare in North America, revolution in France, and then a successful uprising in Haiti set the stage. Hidalgo and Morelos tested Spain's resolve in Mexico; Simón Bolívar's forces ousted the Spanish Captain General from Colombia; Jose de San Martín moved north to liberate Argentina and Chile. This was the generation of revolution in Latin America and, perhaps more than before or since, an age of realism. This sociological background, together with Humboldt's insistence on objective truth, is responsible for the recognizable, exact landscape art of Rugendas as expressed so convincingly in his works.

Philosophically, the post-revolutionary age was a time for the construction of new realities in Latin America. The philosophical cornerstone of the new order was positivism, which in Latin America evolved from social romanticism and French traditionalism, among other influences (Zea, 1963). According to the Latin American philosopher Leopoldo Zea,

The Hispanic Americans regarded positivism as a redeeming philosophical doctrine. They looked upon it as the instrument most suitable for attaining their full intellectual freedom and with it a new order which was to have repercussions in political and social fields. They regarded positivism as the philosophy suitable for imposing a new intellectual order which would replace the one destroyed, thus ending a long era of violence and political and social anarchy (Zea, 1963, 27).

This powerful organizing concept was used to destroy the spirit that made despotism possible and replace it with a new order based on science, education, and material progress. This spirit is reflected in Rugendas' art, which is, above all, literal, pragmatic, and optimistic, portraying the new vigor of Latin America stimulated by the vision of a potentially brilliant future.

Within art itself there are many clues to understanding Rugendas' landscapes. European art in the first half of the nineteenth century has been interpreted as a contest between Delacroix the colorist and Ingres the draftsman (de la Croix and

Tansey, 1975, 662-687). Johann Rugendas is said to be a disciple of Ingres and, as his master, he copies his subject as faithfully as possible. Moreover, Rugendas' work is similar to Ingres' in its 'sculpturesque' style: polished surfaces and simple rounded volumes controlled by rhythmically flowing contours" (de la Croix and Tansey, 1975, 679). Rugendas also mirrors Ingres' color sense which, although not as dominant as Delacroix's, was superb:

“In his best paintings, Ingres creates color and tonal relationships so tasteful and subtle as to render them unforgettable” (de la Croix and Tansey, 1975, 679).

With the guidance of Sir Kenneth Clark it has been possible to gain a basic understanding of the sociological, philosophical and artistic background of Johann Rugendas' extraordinary success as a painter of Latin American landscapes. The geographic elements remain to be explored.

The value of geography in the analysis of Romantic landscape art, particularly the Latin American landscape art of Johann Moritz Rugendas, may be investigated within the framework offered by Eric Newton in *The Romantic Rebellion* (1962). Newton relates that the Romantic artist is:

“The artist who is exceptionally sensitive to those types of experience that involve mystery, abnormality and conflict, who can most vividly translate such experiences into a mental image, who can most effectively discover the formal equivalent of that image, and who can evolve a purely technical means of making that formal image both intelligible and eloquent in his work of art” (Newton, 1962, 55).

Mystery, to Newton, is inherent in mountain scenery because the mountain conceals a hidden side as well as precipices, ravines, and torrents not easily penetrated and perceived. Plains, except under certain conditions of light, are not productive of the Romantic mood. Abnormality, expressed in departure from the average, is one of the chief characteristics of Romantic art: "The romantic artist can only exercise his full power when he is surprised or excited by the unfamiliar" (Newton, 1962, 60). The quality of conflict, at the root of the Romantic states of mind, produces the typical tension of Romantic art. Finally, Newton states:

“The preoccupation with landscape that is not regarded as a background to Man's life, but as a half-personified set of forces that can dominate him, is essentially a

romantic preconception. It gives birth to landscape painting as such, since Nature, to the romantic eye, is self-sufficient and need no longer justify herself by being regarded as an 'environment.' This shift in attitude that begins, in romantic periods, to rejoice in the struggle between Man and his environment affects every branch of art" (Newton, 1962, 63).

David McKinley extends the analogy:

"Romanticism, in its reverence for the integrity of the exotic and its presuppositions of a divine fullness in kinds of things, helped lay the groundwork for modern ecology and natural history" (McKinley, 1969, 354).

The argument may well be advanced to its conclusion, that Romantic art and geography are mutually interrelated.

As the discipline that traditionally has focused on relationships between and among people and environment, geography offers a new avenue for the analysis of Romantic art. In the case of Rugendas, geography offers clues to why his art is unquestionably Romantic as well as reflective of nineteenth century Latin America.

This interrelationship between geography and Romantic art may be illustrated by a brief reference to Rugendas' painting "Bivouac in the Chilean Andes" (Figure 2). In this scene his mountains are dark, foreboding and loom larger than life; in Newton's terms, they are a dominating force that epitomizes the struggle between people and environment. The mystery experience is evoked not only by the dark mountains themselves but by the lonely, half-illuminated figures surrounding the small campfire in the center of the painting. The sense of the unfamiliar is generated not only by the Latin American site but also by the detached fire in the midst of the rugged mountains, without evidence of guideposts or trails. The Romantic conflict is engendered by the large oval boulders set in an otherwise angular landscape -- boulders that appear to be in a position to crush the unwary party. In other words, all the elements that make "Bivouac in the Chilean Andes" a Romantic painting are environmental, in this case topographical, elements that are viewed slightly differently by the artist and interpreted as mysterious, abnormal, or in conflict by the viewer. Others can be trained to perceive these unusual juxtapositions in the landscape but the geographer's eye jumps to them.²

The translation of the illusion of Latin America into the image of Latin America

involves more than art but, as Humboldt believed, art can provide a useful key to its understanding. A geographical interpretation of the landscapes of Johann Moritz Rugendas illustrates that the essence of his success as a reportorial and a Romantic artist in Latin America is not only that he is a mirror to his times in sociological, philosophical, and artistic terms, but also that he has a distinct geographical ability to place landscape elements in unusual juxtaposition to evoke mystery, abnormality, and conflict. Humboldt demanded authenticity while other Northern Europeans required mystery. It appears that in the genius of Rugendas they had both.

The opportunity for geographical research based on landscape art, particularly the reportorial, *costumbrista* landscape art of nineteenth century Latin America, is an exciting prospect. The apparent interrelationships between geography and art may forge a new and rewarding approach to understanding important spatial relationships.

Notes

1. This is a fact of common knowledge, supported by numerous histories of the Age of Discovery. The reflection of this idea in art may be traced through such sources as Robert C. Smith and Elizabeth Wilder, *A Guide to the Art of Latin America* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1949); Leopoldo Castedo, *A History of Latin American Art and Architecture from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Hugh Honour, *The European Vision of America* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975); Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land; European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1975); and Elizabeth Wilder Weismann, "The History of Art in Latin America, 1500-1800, Some Trends and Challenges in the Last Decade," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 10 No.1 (Spring 1975), 7-50.
2. Evidence of this interest is a series of recent works on the interrelationships between geography and art. See, for example, Pradyumna P. Karan and Cotton Mather, "Art and Geography: Patterns in the Himalayas," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 66 (1976), 487-515; Ronald Rees, "John Constable and the Art of Geography," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 66 (1976), 59-72; and D.E. Cosgrove, "John Ruskin and the Geographical Imagination," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 69 (1979), 43-62. The interrelationships are evident in Rees (p. 59) when he states that "The similarity in approaches to landscape taken by the

geographer and the landscape painter have been acknowledged since the first half of the Nineteenth Century. Both are committed to developing coherent descriptions of the surface of the earth, in that they are concerned with associations of phenomena rather than with individual features in the landscapes. Ends, aesthetic in one case and scientific in the other, rather than means distinguish their pursuits."

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