C.G. BOERNER
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
24 June 2020

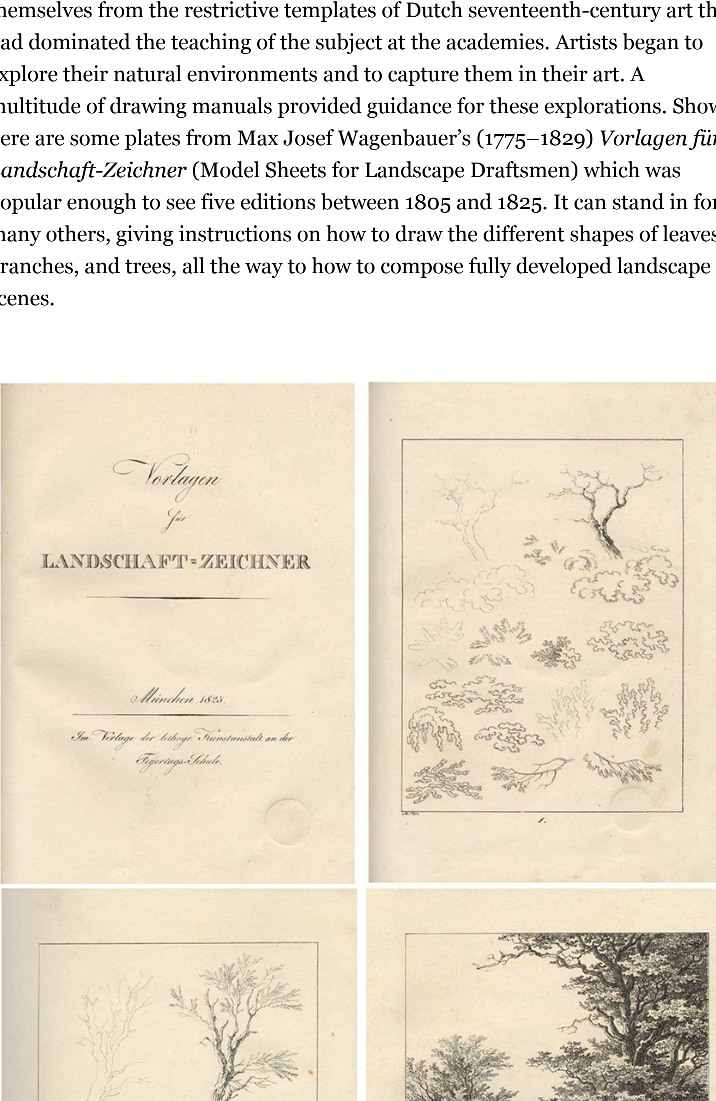
In my first landscape-related *Abwechslung* on May 5, I mentioned that any artistic sublimation of nature into landscape presupposes a separation between nature and its beholder. Only when we can observe nature from the safety of civilization, however precarious it might be, can we enjoy it for its beauty as well as for its ominous and dangerous qualities; indeed, these last two components are integral to the experience of what eighteenth-century philosophers understood as the Sublime.

(photo: Armin Kunz)

This separation comes at a price. As early as 1757, Salomon Gessner lamented the “unglykliche Entfernung von der Natur” (unfortunate distancing from nature), and a decade later, Denis Diderot was the first to observe that city dwellers put up landscape images in their urban *salons* to compensate for the loss of nature in their daily lives. As Oskar Bätschmann reminds us in his concise 1989 study *Entfernung der Natur: Landschaftsmalerei 1750–1920*, “compensation” means that while the loss of nature is recognized, there is (too) little that is done to stop it. Its exploitation has continued ever since. The natural world has been relentlessly stripped bare, and the last remaining protected natural regions are rapidly shrinking. Under the wise leadership of its current president, the US government is working hard on undoing rules and regulations put in place over the course of the last century to protect natural preserves, only to be outdone by Brazil’s even more aggressive destruction of the rain forest (as it happens, this competition is echoed in the two countries’ successful climb to the top of global statistics on infections and deaths caused by the current Coronavirus).

However, at least at the beginning of this process, the artistic “compensation” that Bätschmann refers to was hugely successful. When Jacob Burckhardt was commissioned to write the entry on “landscape painting” for the ninth edition of Brockhaus’s *Real-Encyklopädie* in 1845, he described the “wilde Regellosigkeit” (wild unruliness) of the genre but also acknowledged that landscape painting enjoyed great popularity and reflected the highest level of creative progress.

By the end of the eighteenth century, landscape artists had finally liberated themselves from the restrictive templates of Dutch seventeenth-century art that had dominated the teaching of the subject at the academies. Artists began to explore their natural environments and to capture them in their art. A multitude of drawing manuals provided guidance for these explorations. Shown here are some plates from Max Josef Wagenbauer’s (1775–1829) *Vorlagen für Landschaft-Zeichner* (Model Sheets for Landscape Draftsmen) which was popular enough to see five editions between 1805 and 1825. It can stand in for many others, giving instructions on how to draw the different shapes of leaves, branches, and trees, all the way to how to compose fully developed landscape scenes.



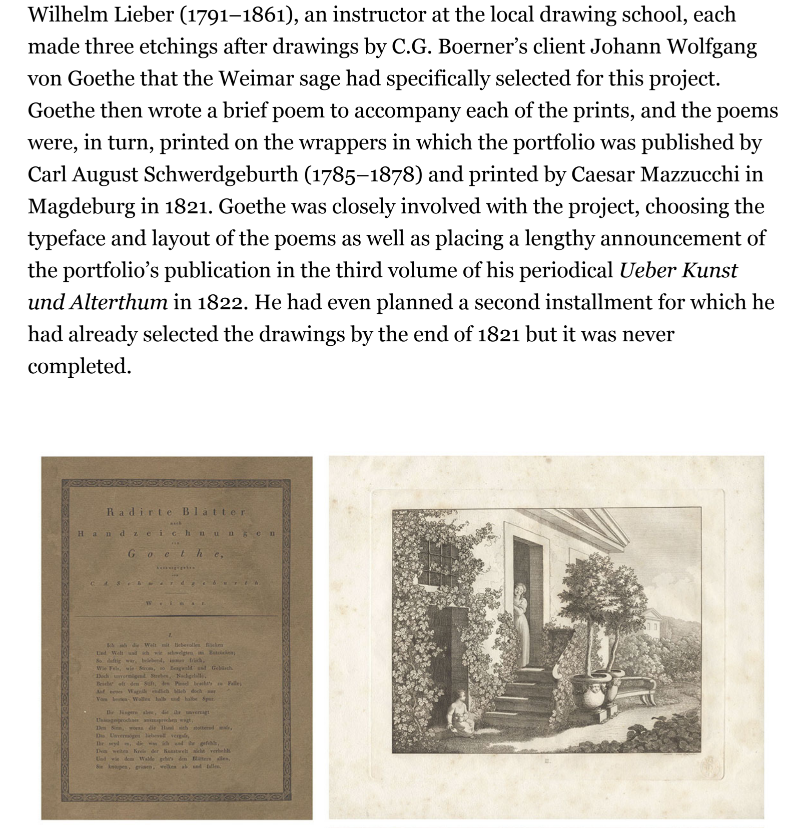
The landscapes the artists encountered in nineteenth-century Europe were hardly untouched by human intervention, of course. Even the symbolically charged lone trees in Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings are effectively witnesses to centuries of deforestation. What artists did encounter in these natural locations, though, were traces of the past. The modest print that Siegfried Detlev Bendixen (1786–1864) etched as a friendship gift for the art patron and dealer Georg Ernst Harzen is a good example of this.

It shows the so-called Karlstein near Buxtehude, not far from Hamburg, an erratic boulder deposited on the northern German plain by the retreating glaciers of the last Ice Age. According to folklore, the Karlstein was associated with Charlemagne and his campaigns to convert the Saxon heathens—though the ruthless brutality of such Christian conversion efforts was hardly touched upon in the heroic history writing of the period.

Ernst Fries’s (1801–1833) view of Heidelberg Castle refers to more recent historical events. Towering above the town, the *Schloss* is one of the finest examples of Late Renaissance architecture in Germany, but large parts of it were destroyed by the troops of Louis XIV during the War of the Palatine Succession in the seventeenth century. The crayon lithograph, printed with a warm ocher-tone stone, is part of a set of six prints published in 1820, less than a decade after this prominent ruin was designated a national monument in the course of the Napoleonic Wars of 1813 to 1815.

The frequent use of aquatint is another characteristic of early nineteenth-century landscape prints. This fairly new technique encouraged experimentation. It enabled artists to add layers of tone that could either evoke nocturnal light (see Anton Kölbl’s [1771–1843] *Pines on a Mountaintop* above) or be used to convincingly translate the tonal washes of the drawings that some prints were modelled on (as in Christian Haldenwang’s [1770–1831] aquatint etching after Heinrich Theodor Wehle below).

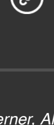
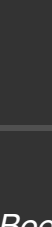
I would like to conclude here with what one might call a “double-layered artistic translation once transposed”: Carl Wilhelm Holdermann (1783–1852), a set decorator and later also director at the court theater in Weimar, and Carl Wilhelm Lieber (1791–1861), an instructor at the local drawing school, each made three etchings after drawings by C.G. Boerner’s client Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that the Weimar sage had specifically selected for this project. Goethe then wrote a brief poem to accompany each of the prints, and the poems were, in turn, printed on the wrappers in which the portfolio was published by Carl August Schwerdgeburth (1785–1878) and printed by Caesar Mazzucchi in Magdeburg in 1821. Goethe was closely involved with the project, choosing the typeface and layout of the poems as well as placing a lengthy announcement of the portfolio’s publication in the third volume of his periodical *Ueber Kunst und Alterthum* in 1822. He had even planned a second installment for which he had already selected the drawings by the end of 1821 but it was never completed.



However, Goethe knew not to overestimate his artistic capabilities. In his conversations with Eckermann he once remarked: “In Italy in my fortieth year I was intelligent enough to recognize that I had no talent for the visual arts and that my efforts in this direction were misplaced.” For him, the fascination of this project lay in the opportunity it allowed him to address a given subject—here the depiction of landscape—in both a visual and a poetic way. In his announcement, he writes that “the undertaking of several worthy artists to edit etched plates after my drawings must be welcome to me in more than one sense. As music is welcome to the poet … so it is a pleasure to see here old long-faded sheets rescued from the stream of Lethe . . . And he who is not in a position to create himself, will . . . profit from intercourse with creative men, and, if not on this side, at least from another side form and educate himself. With the feeling that these sketches that are now laid before the public cannot entirely overcome their inadequacies themselves, I have added a small poem to each, so that their inner meaning can be perceived, and the viewer might be laudably deceived, as if he saw with his eyes what he feels and thinks, that is a closeness to the state in which the draughtsman found himself when he committed his few lines to paper.”

And to all this layering of artistic expression, we can ultimately even add what has become a leitmotif in my own writing over these recent weeks: the “translation” of drawing into print.

Art and Nature

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