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Cityscape as an Inspiration for Contemporary Painting

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Abstract

Cityscape painting or Urban Landscape Painting is an art that depends on city scenes and their elements such as streets, buildings, types, composition and other city elements. This kind of art considers cities as a source of inspiration, because it reflects all the different sides of the cities like its identity, ancientness, modernity, size, density, interstitial space built forms, and of course the architectural design. Moreover, this research is concerned with this form of art that reflects all the differences between the artists' technical trends and the artistic visions of each one separately. This will be discussed given the interest to find the mutual effective relationship between the artist and the city through an analytical comparison between different examples of paintings that dealt with cities as a subject.

Introduction

“Whether we are aware of it or not, architecture is a part of everybody’s personal history. It is the place where we are born and where we work and play, think and make things and eventually will die. We wake up in a building and go to another” accordingly, a lot of artists get inspired by buildings (Nuttgens, 1997). Since the beginning of human history, artists were inspired by everything that falls under their sights from nature to things surrounding them. They get their inspiration from a number of different objects and for a lot of purposes, motivations, incentives, rationales, intentions, rituals, ceremonies, or cultural traditions to make their visual arts. Artists have other aesthetic considerations that differ from our understanding of art today (Lamp, n.d.). This happens when a piece of architecture becomes pleasant to draw or paint in great art works, in this type of painting, artists use light, shadow, perspective, lines and styles (Schaller, 1998). All that led to the emergence of cityscape painting which is considered in visual arts as a painting of the urban properties of each city. It reverberates several parts of cities like skylines, buildings, streets, parks and the main structural specifications of cities which we consider the urban landscape (Cityscape Art: A Walk Through History, 2015).

1. Cityscape Painting History

The city is obviously not a newcomer to art, but since the emergence of cities, it has become an inspiration for painters. We can recognize the value of cityscapes in a lot of paintings, but the beginning of cityscape painting was in the ancient world.

1. 1. Cityscape in the Ancient World

There’s no exact date for neither the birth of the first city nor to the start of cityscapes art. However, early works date back to Ancient Rome in the first century. It was a large fresco about 10 square meters in the Baths of Trajan. There was a massive bathing area commissioned by Emperor Trajan. They were being utilized mainly as a

recreational and social center by Roman citizens, both men and women; (Fig. 1) depicts a view of a city by bird's eye perspective, in which we can see clearly: theaters – temples – statues – houses and a series of canals. It possibly shows an imaginary type of an ideal city (Old News, 2013). The theme of the fresco is unusual because classical wall painting tended to represent rural landscapes, not city streets.



Fig. 1 (detail) the Baths of Trajan

2. 1. Cityscape in the Middle Ages

Cityscapes were current during the Middle Ages but used to appear as a background for biblical themes and portraits rather than having a specific role in the painting composition. However, in the late 13th and 14th century, painting started to be influenced by it, thanks to Duccio da Buonisegna (National Gallery of Art, n.d.) and his 'Road to Emmaus appearance' (Fig.3) and also Giotto di Bondone's 'Legend of St Francis' (Fig. 4) (Giotto, 2017). It is often thought that Ambrogio Lorenzetti has painted the first true cityscape 'The Allegory of Good Government' (Fig. 5). That painting sparked a remarkable tradition in Italy and Northern Europe and after that, artists continued to paint the city in the background of many paintings.



Fig. 3 (detail) Road to Emmaus appearance 1308-1311



Fig. 4 (detail) Legend of St Francis appearance 1297 - 1299 fresco - 270 cm x 230 cm



Fig. 5 The Allegory of Good Government -1338 - 1339 -200x770 cm fresco

1.3 17th and 18th Century

From the 16th up to the 18th century, numerous works were made showing cities in a bird's eye view or from a high angle as if seen by a flying bird. However, in the middle of the 17th century, the cityscape became a separated subject such as the 'View of Delft' by Jan Vermeer, (Fig. 6) which shows a portrait of a city in western Holland. By following the Dutch example, cities became subjects for European painters and a very popular subject for cityscape painters. The flourishing time of the Cityscape Painting was the 18th century by Giovanni Antonio Canaletto's 'The Entrance to the Grand Canal, Venice' (Fig.7). Canaletto is said to be an artist who could "make the sun shine in his paintings" (W., 2015) . Two of the most talented followers were Francesco Guardi's 'View on the Grand Canal at San Geremia' (Fig. 8) and Bernardo Bellotto Dresden's from the Right Bank of the Elbe (Fig. 9).



Fig. 6 'View of Delft' 1660-1661 Oil on canvas 96.5 cm × 115.7 cm



Fig. 7 the Entrance to the Grand Canal, 1730 oil on canvas Painting 49.6 cm x 73.6 cm



Fig. 8 View on the Grand Canal at San Geremia, Venice(1760-65)



Fig. 9 Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe, 1747 oil on canvas 132 cm x 236 cm

1.4 19th Century

In the 19th century, painters were interested in life in the city such as building sites and industrial areas, which became subjects for cityscapes. During the late 19th century, impressionists focused on the everyday urban life, building sites and industrial areas as they all became subjects for cityscapes. However, Paris was the most common subject for impressionist artists as it was the definitive source of inspiration for painters such as Gustave Caillebotte 'Rue Halévy, vue d'un sixième étage' (Fig. 10) and Camille Pissarro 'Avenue de l'Opera, Morning Sunshine' (Fig. 11). To create this painting, he rented a room in the Hotel du Louvre situated on the Place du Palais Royal and to be able to see the views of the Rue de l'Opera, and the Place du Theatre Francais. He painted the building, the roundabouts in free brushwork, but he also had to contend with the moving traffic and the pedestrians entering and leaving the Place du Theatre Francais from different directions (The Avenue de l'Opera, Sunlight, Winter Morning, 1898). The 19th century also brought American cityscape painting through important artists such as Childe Hassam, (Fig. 12) who focused on painting everyday life in New York City.



Fig. 10 Rue Halévy, vue d'un sixième étage 1878 oil on canvas 60 × 73 cm



Fig. 11 Avenue de l'Opera, Morning Sunshine - by 1897 - 964 × 779cm



Fig. 12 Rainy Day

2. Contemporary Cityscape Painting

Cityscapes have been considerably a part of the history of contemporary painting because painters had an interest in specifications of the new elements of the modern city. The avant-garde brought the varied vision of the cityscape such as the works of Cubist painters Fernand Leger 'The City', (Fig. 13) which presents the Cubist notion of fracturing objects into geometric shapes, but retained an interest in depicting the illusion of three-dimensionality. Influenced by the urban spaces, he expressed the noise, dynamism, and speed of new technology in the illusion of three dimensionalities with experiments in abstraction and non-representation. Also Robert Delaunay and his 'Champs de Mars, La Tour rouge' (Fig. 14), infused the dynamism of modern life into this painting by employing multiple viewpoints, rhythmic fragmentation of form, and color contrasts. Delaunay accentuated the structure's towering presence by framing it with tall buildings and placing smaller, shorter buildings, seen from above, at its base. The top of the tower seems to soar, its massive structure augmented by wing like clouds and patches of light-filled sky (artic.edu, n.d.). Through works by painters from the School of Paris, the paintings on the way to abstraction inspired some abstract painters like Joan Mitchell who painted 'City Landscape' (Fig.15) however, it's still abstract expressionism (Birmingham Museum of Art, 2010). Later on, all the attention of painters of the 20th century became focused on the abstract (Arnheim, 1969) and conceptual art; the production of cityscapes became rare accordingly .



Fig. 13 the City (La Ville), 1919 oil on canvas, 231.1 x 298.4 cm



Fig. 14 The Red Tower 1911-160.7 x 128.6 cm



Fig. 15 City Landscape 1955 oil, canvas

Edward Hopper was one of the most important realist painters, and was the only one who created intriguing paintings of the American streets scene. He had a unique and selective vision when portraying an empty cityscape, while capturing the mood and the feeling of the 20th century such as 'Early Sunday Morning' (Fig.16), a painting of a peaceful scene of a closed small business. His painting appears as a picture of New York or an image of America. He had painted the architecture of the buildings to look like basic industries such as selling shoes and clothes. The dark passage in the upper-right corner of the picture is the large side of the building next to the sunny block (Edward Hopper, n.d.). Hopper said that he is "always using nature as the medium to try to project upon canvas my most intimate reaction to the subject as it appears when I like it most; when the facts are given unity by my interests and prejudices. Why I select certain subjects rather than others, I do not exactly know unless it is that I believe them to be the best mediums for a synthesis of my inner experience." He created many paintings that deal with the line of city block buildings, while architecture plays a main role in his work. He admitted saying "I was always interested in architecture, but the editors wanted people waving their arms." Thus, his buildings are protagonists that show embodiment cultural and social concepts.



Fig. 16 Early Sunday Morning 1930

The revival of figurative art towards the end of the 20th century was a revisit to cityscape painting. Photorealist and hyperrealist painters have made an important contribution to cityscape painting in more recent times (Cityscape Art: A Walk Through History, 2015). Cityscape has experienced a renaissance through the works of the painters from the hyperrealists and street photographers to present the cityscapes artworks of contemporary art (Stunning Art Cityscapes of Contemporary Art, n.d.). Well-known contemporary cityscape painters include Rackstraw Downes, who has been painting panoramic scenes of the American land and cityscape for over thirty-five years (Schwartz, Sanford, Storr, Robert, Downes, Rackstraw, 2005). Painted after a lot of studies that could last from days to months, his paintings evince careful attention to details and possess a unique balance between realism and abstraction. Subjects like ventilation towers (Fig. 17) depicting the subway underpasses, barbed wire fences, constructions and landfills, prove that he is fascinated by what he describes as ‘the magic’ of these places. In his painting, we can see demolition and excavation on the site of equitable life assurance society’s new tower at 7th avenue and 52nd street, (Fig. 18) a crowded painting with a holistic view for what is around him. He said “as far as one can see” or distinguish the ordinary from the extraordinary. He instances to put in the painting all that he can see his desire to recognize the space in height, depth and time (Downes, n.d.). Another artist, Antonio López García and his paintings Grand Via by Antonio (Fig. 19) and View of Madrid from Martínez Campos (Fig. 20) seemed to have been influenced by European painters in their aesthetic. He had to learn from the past but he painted his time. Moreover, he passes through the knowledge and the experience to extract the technique of the ancient painters. He said "Living in a city like Madrid, the most interesting thing is the pulse of life. It's not a city with a special level of culture, but you still see the people, the men, the women, the children, the sickness, the good, and the bad. I want to get close to all that, and those are the motives of my paintings." His paintings have a special spirit in all the forms, and everything was done correctly.



Fig. 17 Ventilation Tower with Estivating Snow Plows, 1988



Fig. 18 Demolition and excavation on the site 1983- oil on canvas – 81.28x91.44cm



Fig. 19 Grand Via by Antonio López García, 1974-1981, 500 x 522



Fig. 20 View of Madrid from Martínez Campos 1960, oil painting on board, 48 x 96 oilpainting

Richard Estes, known to be a Photorealist, creates his paintings from photographs (Graham, 2007). His paintings show reflective surfaces and often his inspiration is New York City and he shows it like a new city with its iconic

sites while giving it life. His ‘Columbus Avenue at 90th Street’ (Fig. 21) is one of his most famous cityscapes that presents perspective and reflection in a symmetrical composition and a panoramic view. The bright sunlight and deep shadow plays an important role in many of his cityscapes, while the foreground of the painting have shadows and the bright sunlight areas draw the distance, increasing the sense of depth (Five Richard Estes paintings you should know about, n.d.). Besides that, his storefront creates reflection images. “The city as both a reality and an abstraction becomes the subject of the painting. Hyperreal in its detailed perfection, it evokes the city as an ideal.” He might have focused on the urban environment by avoiding the inclusion of any citizens in his scenes, as “The city is a construct of mankind yet humanity can seem eerily absent from Estes’s urban landscapes of the 1970s and 1980s.”



Fig. 21 Columbus Avenue at 90th Street - (1974) by Richard Estes

Another painter is Yvonne Jacquette, who made a specialty of aerial cityscapes (Cozzolino, 2012). She creates low-altitude aerial landscapes using pointillist-like techniques. She began chartering planes to flying commercial airlines in order to sketch and study landscapes and clouds to get the views she desired. She began formations of ‘Third Avenue (with reflection) III’, in 2005 (Fig. 22). It shows the contrast between her quilt-like style and the gleaming modern skyscrapers and rushing traffic of Manhattan. In ‘Empire State Building II’ (Fig. 23) is night views of New York City, her cityscapes are characterized by their intense colors and elaborate detail (Jacquette, n.d.). It inspired an ongoing exploration of the effects of bright lights, reflections, and indistinct objects set against surrounding darkness.

In a different style, Francis Livingston painted primarily in a monochromatic way with a love for nostalgia. He painted places which may no longer exist. His bold and impressionistic paintings take the viewer back in time to the day when amusement parks with wooden roller coasters, movie theatres with neon signs and buildings with ornate embellishments were in their prime as in ‘city sky’ (Fig. 24). His thickly applied brush strokes that emphasized shape rather than line, his scenes of yesteryear have exciting movement, color, texture and balance (livingston, n.d.). On the contrary, Stephen Wiltshire’s panoramic cityscape painting, the ‘Manhattan Skyline from top of Empire State’ (Fig. 25) looks photorealistic.

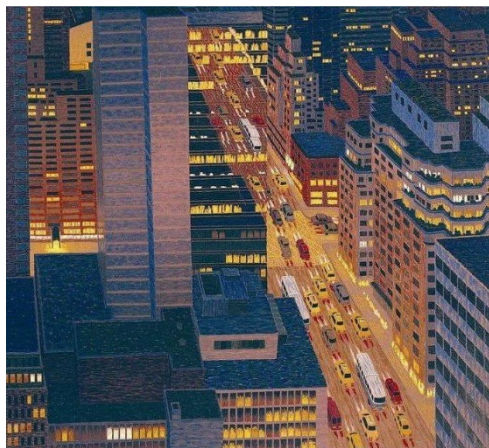


Fig. 22 Third Avenue (with reflection) III, 2005



Fig. 23 Empire State Building II, 2009. Oil on canvas



Fig. 24 city sky 2017 oil on panel 24 x 36 inches



Fig. 25 Manhattan Skyline from top of Empire State- oil on canvas 765 x 573 cm

In the same way, Cairo, the capital of Egypt has inspired many artists since the French Expedition between (1798 -1801), when artists painted every detail in the 'Description of Egypt' book. Moreover, contemporary painters depicted Cairo in many ways, where some of them were interested in the details, the architectural composition, the architectural diversity of styles and its sense of rich history. Other painters paid attention to the life in the city that does not sleep. Reda Abdel Salam's abstract expressionism paintings summarized life in the city with its hustle and its beauty. He expressed the rhythm of life and its frequency in a hard mix of color (Fig. 26). While in an atmosphere of mystical realism, Mahmoud Bakshesh shortened the forms of his city, and turned it into shades. The colors are luminous and cool at the same time, as his cities were dominated by dormancy and silence (عز الدين نجيب, 2007). As we see in his painting 'City and barriers' (Fig. 27), it is depicting a view of a city from afar and the buildings are almost barely visible, while the desert colors are blurry. He presented a city imprisoned in iron barricades.



Fig. 26 The rhythm of life in the city 2 Oil painting on Cardboard 100x70 -1991



Fig. 27 City and barriers - oil painting -75x60 cm -1986

In a completely different point of view, we find paintings of Zahran Salama offer a study filled with details nearest to the photorealism. His city was soaked in an atmosphere filled with history and modernity, which we can see in his painting (Fig.28). In the same approach, we find Nabil Metwally, who was inspired by ancient Cairo, especially the archeological-like appearance of the aesthetics, and where ancient buildings belong to several historical eras mixed with contemporary human life (Fig.29).



Fig. 28 Oil painting on canvas 2000

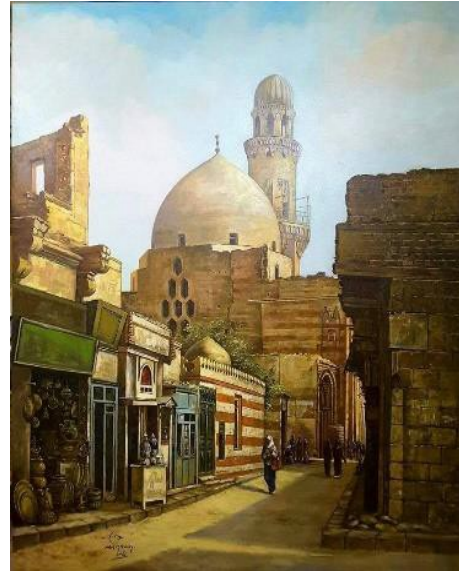


Fig. 29 view from Gamalia 1 Oil on canvas 130 x150 cm - 2016

3. Conclusion

The beginning of cityscape painting goes back to the ancient world and was prominent during the Middle Ages, but used to appear as a background. However, in the middle of the 17th century, the cityscape became a separated subject. In the 19th century, the painters were interested in the life in the city and during late 19th century, impressionists focused on the everyday urban life that became subjects for cityscapes. Cityscapes have been considerably a part of the contemporary history of painting because painters had an interest in specifications of the new elements of the modern city. Cityscape painting is an art that depends on city scenes and all their elements. Cityscape painters consider the city as a source of inspiration such as identity, anciently, modernity, size, densness, interstitial space built forms, and of course its architectural design. These paintings reflect all the differences between the artists' technical trends and the artistic visions of each one separately. Photorealist and hyperrealist painters have made an important contribution to cityscape painting that has experienced a renaissance through their works. The contemporary painters depicted the city in many ways; some of them were interested in painting each detail and some of them were interested in expressing their feelings toward it.

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