

8-1-1966

A series of landscape studies in oil painting and other media exploring and interpreting natural landscape elements with emphasis on the relationship between plastic space and visual space

Eugene Neal Olson
Portland State University

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.318>

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

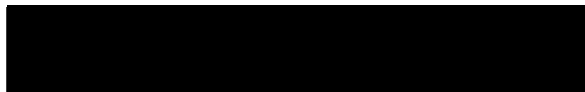
Eugene Neal Olson for the Master of Science in
Teaching in Art

Date thesis is presented

July 21, 1966

Title A SERIES OF LANDSCAPE STUDIES IN OIL PAINTING AND OTHER
MEDIA EXPLORING AND INTERPRETING NATURAL LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLASTIC SPACE AND
VISUAL SPACE

Abstract approved



In working with paintings dealing with the interpretation of landscape in oil paint and mixed media during the past year, I have seen new possibilities. This is true both of my approach to landscape painting and of the handling of the painting materials. These studies have led me to a freer handling of paint. In addition, they have led me to be able to make a more universal statement concerning landscape itself rather than only a visual representation of one particular landscape.

The first indication that a universal statement about landscape could be achieved became apparent to me while I was working with mixed media. The natural action of one medium upon the other very often suggests landscape forms which the artist can clarify into a statement about landscape. Using the paint itself to develop a motif enables

one to deal more directly with ideas about landscape, concepts of color, and spatial perspective than with the illusion of a particular place. It is such experimentation as this that led me toward what I believe to be a universal statement about landscape.

Another discovery I made in doing the series was that oil paint could be handled in much the same manner as mixed media. However, it is the action of one oil color upon another while in a liquid state that becomes the means of suggesting forms. It is the rhythmic movement of these forms and colors that reflects the constant changing and movement of nature. To me this is the essence of the natural landscape and that which brings life to it.

In this series of paintings the subjective analysis of nature inevitably dropped the objective details of the real landscape. One's attention begins to be centered on the effects of the total landscape --- effects of color changes, rhythm and movement, form relationships, spatial relationships, and atmospheric effects, events that are to be found in nature itself. My major consideration in doing this series of paintings was that of color in which I had to decide which colors would best suit the total impression I sought and express plastic space as well.

A major discovery for me was that of the difference between wash painting and brush painting. In brush painting ideas are somewhat changed as work progresses, but, generally, each brush stroke and each color is calculated from the

beginning to produce a desired effect. In wash painting much of the work on the canvas is the result of searching by the artist in the work itself as the paint develops natural forms on the canvas. The paint and the artist are one, so to speak, until certain forms appear that the artist feels he can work from. It is at this point that he takes over with the brush and fully capitalizes on the developing forms.

I believe that color plays a major role in involving the viewer emotionally and intellectually in a painting. It seems to me that part of the role of the artist is to deliver messages that can invite others, in some way, to share his feeling about the nature of things. For this reason he must seek a statement that will have a universal expression so that he may communicate with others. This I have tried to do.

A SERIES OF LANDSCAPE STUDIES IN OIL PAINTING
AND OTHER MEDIA EXPLORING AND INTERPRETING
NATURAL LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS WITH EMPHASIS
ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLASTIC
SPACE AND VISUAL SPACE

by

EUGENE NEAL OLSON

THESIS REPORT

submitted to

PORTLAND STATE COLLEGE

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN TEACHING

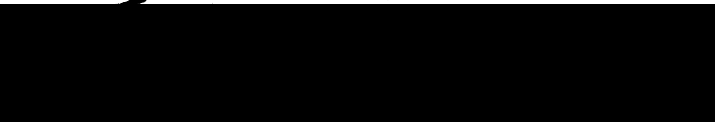
August 1966

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APPROVED:


Associate Professor of Art
In Charge of Major


Head of Department of Art


Dean of Graduate School

Date thesis is presented

July 31, '66

Typed by Sally A. Larson

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A SERIES OF LANDSCAPE STUDIES IN OIL PAINTING
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SPACE AND VISUAL SPACE

In working with the paintings concerned with the interpretation of landscape in oil paint and mixed media during the past year, I have seen new possibilities. This is true of both my approach to landscape painting and to the handling of the painting materials. My thesis, a painting project, is concerned with the interpretation of landscape from diverse points of view. These studies have led me to a freer handling of paint. In addition, they have led me to be able to make a more universal statement concerning landscape itself rather than only a visual representation of one particular landscape. A mountain scene speaks of mountains; a tree speaks of trees; and a mountain stream speaks of mountain streams. Always the universality of a motif is stressed. Yet to arrive at the universal I began with the particular, studying particular locations in the local landscape.

The first painting in this series was executed from studies made on location in the Columbia Gorge, a view of the Oregon side of the gorge from Washington just west of Hood River. (See page 10, a). No other painting in the series is so strongly limited to such an exact location. It was during work on this painting that I began to develop new ideas about the nature of landscape painting: that more could be stated about landscape than whatever could be

said about a particular scene. After this new insight, the series that developed was not concerned with copying landscape but rather with an attempt to find an equivalence to the universals in nature stated in terms of oil paint.

The first indication that a universal statement could be achieved became apparent while I was working with mixed media. Combining ink, tempera, and pastel proved to be a sufficient method of obtaining suggested landscape forms. The natural action of one medium upon the other causes either a blending of the media or a rejection of one by the other. If rejection occurs, a line is generally formed, separating the two media. This line very often suggests landscape which the artist can clarify into a statement about landscape. Using the paint itself as a means of developing ideas about landscape cuts down the reliance of working directly from a particular motif. Also, this enables the artist to deal more directly with ideas about landscape, concepts of color, and spatial perspective than with the illusion of a particular place. It is such experimentation as this that led me to be able to make what I believe to be a more universal statement about landscape.

Another discovery I made in doing the series was that oil paint could be handled in much the same manner as mixed media. However, instead of the action of one medium on the other as in the mixed media, it is the action of one oil color upon another while in a liquid state that becomes the

means of suggesting forms. The subtle blending of colors on the canvas when liquid paints run together achieves infinite varieties of color mixtures not attainable with the brush. It is this blending of colors that creates an indistinctiveness between forms to the point where there is no visible separation of earth and sky. This seems to add vitality to the painting. It is brought to life by the rhythmic movement and counter-movement of the forms and colors. It is this aspect that reflects the constant changing and movement of nature. To me this is the essence of the natural landscape and that which brings life to it.

Chinese landscape painters such as Mi Fei and Fan K'uan of the Sung Period aspired after the spirit of life in their work. The Chinese call it Ch'i, and it is their first canon of painting. The aim of their painting was to show the manifestation of the spirit residing in each and every form. If the painting did not reveal some indication of the spirit (Ch'i), the forms were considered lifeless. They also endeavored to find in their art that spontaneous ease by which an inspiration of the moment might be expressed fully and naturally when the technical means have been mastered. It was this Chinese theory that prompted me to search for a way of capturing nature so that the paintings would be alive and visually moving.¹

¹The Chinese painters of the Sung Period were not the only painters in history who sought a universal statement of landscape. Included are cave dwellers, Leonardo DaVinci, John Cozens, and Twentieth Century painters.

In this series of paintings the subjective analysis of nature inevitably loses the objective details of the real landscape. Trees and bushes are only suggested; grass blades, stones, and pebbles are deemed too small to be seen in a moment's glance at a landscape. The constantly changing pattern of clouds and haze make them hard for an objective application in paint. Mountains and plains become large forms, but not detailed forms. Attention begins to center on effects as the total landscape develops in the mind --- effects of color changes, rhythm and movement, form relationships, spatial relationships, and atmospheric effects. How each effect can be interpreted separately for its importance and yet be unified into a whole statement is the problem each painting has to solve. The first consideration was that of color. What is the total impression sought --- the hot, arid mountains of Eastern Oregon or the cool canyons in the Columbia Gorge? The total impression limited the beginning palette to colors that express the desired effect. Thus, hot colors were used for the desert, warm colors for the plains and barren mountain slopes. Cool colors were used for the cool mountain areas and cold colors for the deep recesses of mountain streams and canyons. It is relatively easy to decide whether the total impression desired is to be warm or cool and then to decide what warm or cool colors to use. In most of the paintings I chose colors that reminded me of the colors I

might find at just such an actual location. From there I tried to develop variations of those colors, sometimes bold variations and sometimes subtle variations. Liquid paints running together were instrumental in achieving the many variations of color. Plastic space was largely achieved with color rather than linear perspective. Colors, when placed upon a surface, actually seem to have a spatial dimension. In general warm colors seem to advance and cool colors seem to recede. The character of such effects, however, may be altered by differences in intensity and size relationships. High intensity colors tend to move forward of lower intensity colors. This is because the eye is trained to visualize spatial perspective in this manner in a real landscape. Colors close to the viewer are of a higher intensity than those in the distance. The lowering of intensity is caused by the density of the atmosphere. The air density not only lowers the intensity of color but appears to change the color; hence, green trees may appear blue or even blue violet in the distance. This bluing caused by the density of the air effects all the colors. They become less intense or gradually change hue. Therefore, it is important to analyze each painting for its own method of showing or intimating spatial perspective. What is true in one painting is not always true in another.

In the brush paintings recession in space is defined by going from warm to cool colors, yellow to green to blue. The high intensity color, as in the Columbia Gorge scene,

is maintained in the sky area to preserve the honesty of the two-dimensional surface.

In both the wash and brush paintings the size relationships help define space. Generally, there are larger objects or color areas in the foreground and smaller objects or color areas in the background. This is easy for the eye to understand since this is the way objects are perceived in visual space. When looking across a landscape, trees (or any object) become progressively larger the closer they are to the viewer. Also, objects close to the viewer appear nearer his feet simply because that is where the ground goes. It follows, then, that large objects or forms near the bottom of a picture would give the illusion of being closer, and small objects and forms at the top of the picture would appear to be in the distance.

It will be noticed that the mingling of the liquid paints caused a haziness between color areas. It is hard for me to suggest the hazy nature of atmosphere in a brush painting because of the hard edge a brush makes when it applies paint to canvas. Therefore, the hazy nature of atmosphere was better achieved in wash paintings. For this reason I felt that a truer statement about landscape was made in this medium. Also, the results of the wash paintings show more vitality because of the spontaneity of technique. The careful selection and application of the brush paintings appear as labored as the production of them was. However, both types of painting technique are,

in reality, carefully worked out. The difference between the two techniques, brush and wash, is in the point at which decisions are made as to what the composition of the painting will be. There are two different approaches to the landscape problem involved. The scheme of the brush paintings is pretty much conceived before work is begun. Some ideas are changed as work progresses, but generally each brush stroke and each color is calculated from the beginning to produce a desired effect.

Wash paintings require a different approach altogether. Much of the work on the canvas is the result of searching by the artist and the characteristic of the paint to develop natural forms on the canvas by itself. The paint's ability to flow produces natural forms not attainable by brush strokes. Once familiar with the flow of the paint, the artist can begin to control it for desired effects without impinging on its natural qualities. The paint and the artist are one, so to speak, until certain forms appear that the artist feels he can work from. It is at this point that the artist takes over with the brush and fully develops the ideas already before him. Dry brush techniques are applied, and the structure of the painting is clarified.

In the brush paintings line is alluded to by color edge meeting color edge which is a less obvious use of line but, nevertheless, a strong statement of line. There is no doubt where earth ends and sky begins or where tree ends and

background begins. However, the edges do not seem clear cut due to the closeness of hue, value, and/or intensity. The eye can easily move from one form to another without encountering a boundary line.

In the wash paintings, lines have been "drawn" in to solidify the forms, to emphasize the landscape shapes, and to enliven the form by the texture and movement of the line. In some cases the diagonal movement of the line attempts to lead the eye in a recessional movement. This is done by drawing the line from bottom to top, a method of implying plastic space. This method works as indicating plastic space because lines seen in a real landscape tend to begin at your feet and come up to the horizon which is about eye level. An attempt has been made not to organize recessional space into planes but to be experienced as a homogeneous recessional movement. The mountain scene in earth colors is an example of a painting organized in planes to imply recessional space. (See page 16, a). Mountain Stream is an example of an attempt at a totally homogeneous movement in space. (See page 17, a). I feel that a homogeneous recessional movement has a greater impact on the viewer because color plays a more important role in this type of statement. I also believe that color plays a major role in involving a viewer emotionally and intellectually in a painting. It seems to me that part of the role of the artist is to deliver messages that can invite others, in some way, to share his

feeling about the nature of things. For this reason he must seek a statement that will have a universal expression so that he may communicate with others. This I have tried to do.

BRUSH PAINTINGS IN OIL



a. RIVER CANYON 45½ in. x 28 in.



b. GOD THE FIRST GARDEN MADE,
AND THE FIRST CITY CAIN.
(Cowley) 44½ in. x 29 in.



a. WHERE FORESTS STOOD 36 in. x 24 in.



b. AETERNUM AENIGMA 30 in. x 18 in.

MIXED MEDIA PAINTINGS



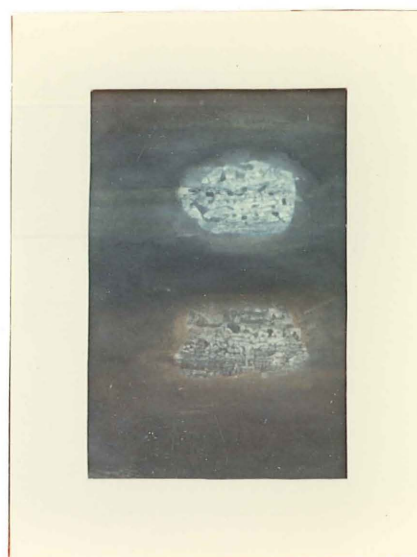
a. MORNING CLOUDS 11 in. x 8½ in.



b. SUMMIT SUNRISE 11 in. x 8½ in.



a. VIOLENT LANDSCAPE 11 in. x 8½ in.



b. REFLECTIONS FROM
THE NIGHT 6 in. x 3 in.



a. THE FIRST HEAVEN 11 in. x 8½ in.

(The first heaven is of pure silver,
and here the stars are hung out like
lamps on golden chains).



b. METAMORPHOSIS: Night into Day
11 in. x 8½ in.



a. NOACHIAN DELUGE 11 in. x 8½ in.



b. TEMPEST 11 in. x 8½ in.

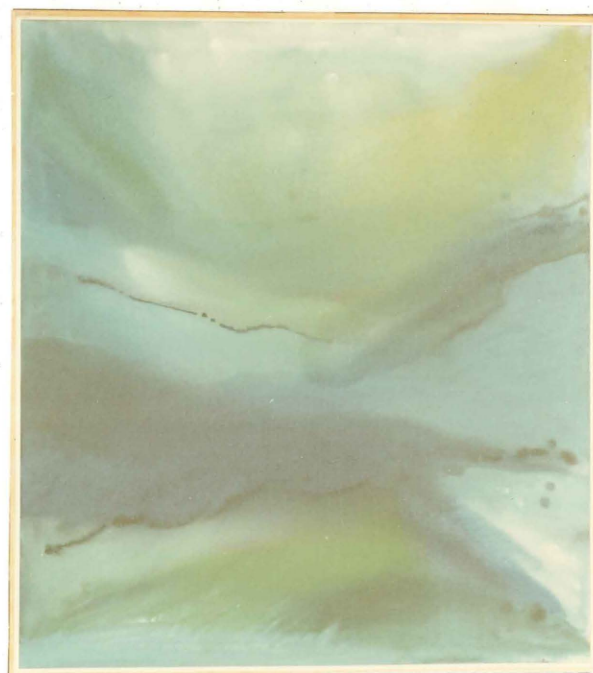
WASH PAINTINGS IN OIL



MOUNTAIN 47 in. x 38 in.

In the sea of life
In the sea of death
My soul, tired
In both, seeks
 The mountain
From which the
 Waters have receded

7th Century Japanese



a. MOUNTAIN STREAM 45½ in. x 39 in.



b. CASCADE RECESSES 36 in. x 33 in.



a. ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER 41 in. x 32½ in.



b. GARDEN OF PROSERPINE 46 in. x 33 in.
(A. C. Swinburne)