



David Ligare
Claude Lorraine: The Painter as Draftsman

It's not often that we have the chance to experience something that is the best that the world has to offer. During the last hectic days of the year I strongly recommend that everyone within range of these words make a pilgrimage to the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco to see the exhibition, *Claude Lorraine: The Painter as Draftsman*. There are approximately eighty drawings, mostly from the British Museum, and a dozen paintings. The drawings are quite simply the most beautiful drawings of the landscape in all of the long history of art. The exhibition closes January 14th.

Briefly, Claude Lorraine (generally called Claude) was born in France in 1600 but lived his entire adult life in Rome. Despite achieving great fame while he was alive, very little is known about his personal life. It seems that he was a simple and uneducated man who, nevertheless managed to inform his world and ours in major ways.

What was Claude's conceptual project? According to his fellow painter, Sandrart, he would lie out in the fields from dawn to dusk storing up the visual effects of light in his brain. In that way he was like the Impressionists who worked two hundred years later. But unlike, say, Monet, whose impressions shattered the world into shimmering bits of

color, Claude sought to present a cohesive naturalism. In other words, all of the chaotic elements of nature fell into a sense of poetic order and wholeness. His paintings invariably contained a detailed foreground (often flanked by embracing trees), a middle ground of winding rivers or roads leading to an exquisite distance paled by sunlight and atmosphere. They are like Aristotle's definition of life; a beginning, a middle and an end. Claude's paintings continued the "pastoral landscape" tradition started by the Venetian artist, Giorgione (1478 - 1510). Claude's project was to present images of a wholeness that heightens our perception of a radiant world.

The process for making his large detailed landscapes was complex. *Plein air* painting was very difficult because portable oil colors in tubes had not yet been invented. In addition to mental observations, Claude would make ink and chalk studies on paper. These studies could be detailed, or they could be very rapid and free, having all the vigor and angular dash of the twentieth century Abstract Expressionists. Most of the drawings are in brown sepia ink which can add a hovering or seeping glow that might be compared to the deep spiritual hum of the paintings of Mark Rothko. He would return to the studio with these notations and impressions and use them to construct his large and carefully detailed compositions.

But Claude's drawings are also fundamentally different from the intentions of the Impressionists or the Abstract Expressionists who were primarily interested in line, shape and color for their own sake. These drawings, which often employed quickly dashed lines, dragged brushes and blossoming washes are not meant to be interesting in and of themselves. They were short-hand notes to himself analyzing and describing what it was he was seeing. As a result they have a simple honesty filled with an almost religious belief in the beauty of nature. The process of trying to capture and understand the integrity of that nature is well-tempered (as in Bach) by a structured tone of richness and order.

The viewer will see two types of drawings in this exhibition. The first are the studies that I have described, the second were drawn from the finished paintings as records, his *Liber Veritatis* or verification book. These drawings have a different, less searching, look to them. Still the pen and the brush dance across the surface of the paper but they have an almost painfully naive completeness about them.

Claude Lorraine worked over three hundred years ago. It's wonderful to see his paintings and drawings in the Legion of Honor but how could he possibly relate to us today? After viewing the exhibition I suggest going immediately to Golden Gate Park and, say, walking around Stowe Lake. If you are like me, the landscape there will be transformed after viewing the drawings and paintings. This is not just coincidental. Claude had a huge influence on landscape architecture in eighteenth century England. Many of the manor houses were surrounded by parks designed to look like Claude paintings. This style was called "the picturesque landscape" and one of its later proponents was the Scottish-born landscape architect, John McLaren who, along with William Hall, created Golden Gate Park from the stark, windswept dunes.

Visiting Golden Gate Park or viewing the paintings and drawings of Claude Lorrain presents us with a median world: a buffer zone between urban life and wilderness. They are also timeless, often with people living among ruins. Thus the paintings and drawings are essays on mortality - the passing of a civilization or the closing of a day. He returns us to the poetic world of the pastoral tradition. That tradition and Claude put us in mind of the beauty and fragility of our own mortality, the joy of attainment and the dearness of our natural world.

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