

ART REVIEW

From East to West



NATURAL WONDER “Grand Canyon of the Colorado River” (1911), an oil by Thomas Moran, is at the Heckscher Museum of Art.

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“Mythic Landscapes of America,” at the [Heckscher Museum of Art](#), is a lucky accident. The museum originally planned a winter show surveying modern artists on Long Island, but fiscal constraints

combined with an ever-growing, ambitious checklist of works that the curators wished to include forced a postponement. Hastily arranged in its place, this show highlights a significant aspect of the museum's collection, enhanced with some related loans.

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HUMAN BLIGHT "Shadowlands" (2008), top, an oil by Deborah Brown, and Doug Hall's photograph "Merced River, Yosemite" (2004) are also part of the "Mythic Landscapes of America" exhibition.

Accident or not, it is a handsome, thoughtful show. Built in 1920 to house the private collection of the industrialist and philanthropist August Heckscher, the museum has more than 2,000 artworks; in the area of landscape painting alone there are important pictures by Canaletto, Eugène-Louis Boudin, William Merritt Chase, Frederic Edwin Church and [Thomas Eakins](#).

The exhibition is arranged chronologically, beginning with a room containing some of the best works from the museum's exceptionally

deep collection of American landscape paintings from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Dominating the selection are heroic paintings of the American West, along with Hudson River School landscapes. As a group they tend to affirm ideas of national identity and the country's natural beauty and splendor.

The idea of the American landscape as an Arcadian sanctuary was especially popular in the 19th century. You can see it in Arthur Parton's delightful and dreamy painting "Hudson River Near Poughkeepsie" (circa 1860), in which the river and the surrounding landscape are devoid of all but the most gentle and fleeting human presence. Typical of many midcentury paintings of the Hudson Valley, it is an image of tranquillity in which human settlement is presented as in complete harmony with nature.

The intensely dramatic coloristic effects of fall foliage in the Northeast were also of interest to 19th-century landscape painters, including Church, Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. "The Woods in Autumn" (1864) by Moran is a splendid painting, accurately representing — in almost photographic detail — nature in a state of seasonal flux. The picture shows a riot of autumn leaves ready to drop from the trees onto the banks of a quiet stream. It is a breathtaking work.

Bierstadt's undated "Autumn Landscape" makes clear that he had a more romantic sensibility than many of the other artists associated with the Hudson River School. Compare, for instance, the eerie, glowing light of this picture with the more measured and naturalistic light found in Moran's "Woods in Autumn" or Church's "Autumn" (circa 1845), another painting of fall foliage in this show. Contemporary critics often found Bierstadt's use of light unconvincing.

Sadly, none of Bierstadt's Western landscapes are here — he was the foremost 19th-century painter of Western scenes — but there is a picture of the Grand Canyon by Moran, who from the 1870s onward

regularly ventured to the West to paint and sketch. In their day, his pictures of the Grand Canyon were famous.

At this point in the show, images of pristine nature gradually give way to scenes evidencing the human impact on the environment. Take, for instance, Ferdinand Richardt's "Niagara" (circa 1855), depicting one of America's greatest natural wonders. This painting is hard to classify, for it fits into the camps of both landscape and genre art, showing a wealth of anecdotal detail, ranging from tourists admiring the view from behind a metal railing to a new hotel at the far right. By the middle of the 19th century, Niagara was already a popular destination for tourists.

The show's smaller second room is devoted to 20th-century representations of the landscape in a variety of media. Taken as a whole, the works are weighted toward human uses and abuses of the landscape, as in Doug Hall's "Merced River, Yosemite" (2004), a large-scale color photograph contrasting the beautiful natural setting of Yosemite with a digitally inserted crowd of beachgoers swarming over the landscape like ants. It is a commentary on the contemporary culture of tourism.

Human activity as blight on the landscape is the subject of several other works, including Deborah Brown's painting "Shadowlands" (2008), in which a lone bison stands nearly in the shadow of a telegraph pole, with cranes and industrial machinery dotting the far horizon. There is an austere, funerary silence, suggesting the passage from one era to the next as the natural majesty of the country comes to be seen as a resource for exploitation.

"Mythic Landscapes of America," Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, through Jan. 4. Information: (631) 351-3250 or heckscher.org.

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