

Hannah 0:00

Hi, and welcome to Seeing Climate Change, the podcast that explores climate change through visual art, personal reflection, science and conversation. I'm Hannah and, as always, I'm joined by my co-host Alex.

Alex 0:27

In this episode, inspired by the William Benton Museum of Art's Seeing Climate Change exhibition, Mackenzie Smith shares conversations she had with art and climate change experts to teach us how to look closely at landscape paintings. Let's listen in.

Mackenzie 0:48

Hi, I'm Mackenzie and I have a question for you. Have you ever found yourself admiring a work of art and not really knowing what you're seeing? Maybe the sparks of curiosity further, but you aren't entirely sure where to go from here. Or maybe you get a little impatient and move on from it entirely. I get it, not every work of art is the same for everyone. Even if landscape painting isn't necessarily your forte, you have to admit you're used to seeing landscapes all around you every day. If you have a spare minute to take a break from all the hustle and bustle of the outside world, let's take a stroll through the galleries here at the Benton together, where we can slow down and unlock the power of a close look with some experts on the matter. UConn's very own Professor Betsy Athens, Professor Robert Thorson and Dr Amanda Douberly.

Mackenzie 1:36

I'm joined by Professor Athens, an art history professor here at UConn. And to get started, I asked her a few questions about her experience with the genre of landscape painting. So how did you get interested in landscape painting?

Professor Athens 1:49

Well, I study in particular the material and visual culture of natural history in the 18th and 19th centuries, and that is a really closely connected to landscape painting. Both of them portray the natural world, but they do it in somewhat different guises.

Mackenzie 2:05

And so what are your personal thoughts about the relationship between landscape art, natural history and environmental science?

Professor Athens 2:13

That's a very good question, because landscape painting often portrays the natural world, but it doesn't always do it in a way that is accurate. Sometimes there are imagined landscapes. Um. So there's an interesting kind of tension between the two. Although there were some artists. Frederic Edwin Church comes to mind. He was very specific about the botanical productions that he portrayed in his landscapes, so that, um, professors of botany bring their students to come and see his painting, and they could identify different sorts of plants. A lot of times a landscape painting is just the imagining of the artist of a particular view, sometimes doesn't

actually portray any existing view. I think there's a really interesting relationship between people's ideas of what nature is and what nature actually is, and that plays out in landscape painting.

Mackenzie 3:07

And following this notion, I spoke to Dr Douberly and Professor Thorson about the idea of an artist's construction of landscape as we looked at a painting featured in the Benton's Seeing Climate Change exhibition.

Dr Douberly 3:19

The title of the painting is Blue Ridge Wilderness. It's by William Louis Sonntag, and it's dated around, um, 1859. Um, so he was making sketching trips in 1859 and 1862, the Shenandoah River Valley. Um, so, you know, this is could be, um, a particular place that he saw. It could also be a bunch of, you know, different places, like an idealized composite of, you know, what he what he saw. So giving us a kind of impression, uh, of, of that, that area rather than a really strong indicator of, um, of an exact location.

Mackenzie 4:12

You mean a mosaic of memories or of places that he's visited?

Dr Douberly 4:18

To pull it all together. Sontag's choice to include certain visual aspects shed light on the presence of specific, yet easily overlooked environmental features incorporated in the artwork. With these factors in mind, Dr Thorson debated what the body of water in this painting may represent.

Professor Thorson 4:33

What I see when I look at this is three things. I see the blue sky at the top and I see the vegetation mountain, you know, the mountainside vegetation, and then I see the lake. So those are the first three visual things that draw me in. And when I look at the lake, I'm immediately drawn to the patch of green on the right, which is probably the most prominent vivid color on the map. And that would be impossible if it weren't once in a while underwater, or washed away, because it would be vegetated. Uh, perhaps it burned, but I don't think so. The idea is that if you look at about this level, you will see, um, you will see bare rock and not much vegetation below that level. And if you look over here, you will see a shoreline that is dragged out, um, you know, from the edge, unusually so, one here to a spit of land with a series of beach rings working its way down. This tells me that this is a reservoir. Rather than a natural lake. And because its level is rising and falling as they demand the water from it, in the same way that a western reservoir would do it. And the clues, they're speculative, of course, you know, but the clues are, are the are the, the progressive drawdown. You see those those little beach lines or rack lines. You know, we're probably on the way down from a high.

Professor Thorson 5:53

And it's typical that you would store as much water as you can and then release it slowly, um, you know, to use to power something downstream. And so that's what I'm looking at. And it may be a complete fancy, you know, but it's consistent with what I see in the picture. It doesn't have to be a reservoir. But in the picture, there certainly is evidence of a significant rise and fall of the shoreline that's typical of a reservoir. But it may be due to some dramatic storm of some sort. I really just don't know.

Mackenzie 6:27

I strongly urge everyone to go check out the show notes there. You'll find some helpful links to the artwork that we've been talking about. If you are able to see Sontag's quote unquote wilderness, what do you think? Does it depict a reservoir or not? How wild, really is this scene? Professor Thorson's observations were the perfect example of an approach used by our historians, which is similar to such scientific study, but works to decode a piece of art. Visual analysis is a method that requires you to take a close look, a long look, and then reflect on what you see. Usually we describe and identify certain visual choices taken by the artists. As these formal characteristics contribute to the overall impression of the work. When it comes to landscapes, this idea can seem kind of overwhelming. I find this especially difficult when there doesn't seem to be an overt subject matter. You probably will find yourself asking where is the best place to start? To that, I'd like to relay a tip on technique offered by Professor Athens. When asked how we should look at nature as it is composed by the artist.

Professor Athens 7:36

There is a tradition in landscape painting that goes back to the artists. Claude is a French artist working in Italy in the 17th century. And, um, he kind of developed this formula for landscape painting, where, um, you have these kind of interlocking wedges of color and tone that kind of gradually bring you from that foreground to the distance. So you kind of wander through the landscape. Um, uh, and you usually start in the foreground and there will be what is often called a repoussoir device, which means to push back. It's usually a tree or a column or something in the foreground that really sort of sets the stage for the landscape. And then often there's a path that you're supposed to kind of visually, uh, trace into the middle distance and then finally to the far distance. And that's, uh, that was often referred to as the picturesque or as a plodding landscape. And it's a technique that artists have used, you know, ever since the 17th century.

Mackenzie 8:41

Sontag's Blue Ridge Wilderness is the sort of picturesque scene. Nature is tamed by the artist. From what we can tell, this early morning in the valley is calm and idyllic. But how do we respond when we see this potentially man made lake disappear beyond its winding path through the trees, enveloped by an approaching cloud of mist? There's an incredibly dynamic emotional state communicated here. How do we as humans size up to nature? In turn, how does nature fall by our hand?

Dr Douberly 9:15

Thinking about how small the fishermen are, they're really dwarfed by the landscape around them, which sort of aligns with the set of ideas around this time, you know, kind of infusing landscape with kind of spiritual, sublime power. And in a lot of ways, it's it's kind of ironic because a lot of the people who were, you know, buying paintings like this were like industrialists. So great to hang that painting in your office where you're making all the choices about how you're you're going to destroy, uh, that landscape, um, you know, through whatever resource extraction or, um, other things.

Professor Thorson 10:05

In 1859, in the United States, there was very little attention to saving anything. Yeah, it was burn, baby. Burn and drill, baby drill and mine, baby mine everywhere.

Mackenzie 10:15

Art empowers us to think and feel critically. To contextualize the idealism of Sontag's wilderness within the height of the Industrial Revolution is again, to question the artworks for soft as much as art can mask the weight of life. It can also shed light on the areas where we still hope. ^{1s} Where there's a space for criticism. There's a place where we can make change happen. Whether you're reading a painted landscape or being mindful of the land that you live with, it's important to understand that we construct the world around us as much, if not more, than it shapes us. Remember, there will always be power in a close look. I just want to give so many thanks to Professor Athens, Professor Thorson and Doctor Dubreuil for talking with me today. I appreciate each of your individual insights, and I've learned so much from the three of you. It's exciting to share all of your expertise with the audience.

Mackenzie 11:08

Okay, now it's time for us to step back into the real world. I hope you'll be able to take a closer look at the landscape all around you. And if you're looking to practice a bit more at an actual art museum, we hope you can visit the exhibition Seeing Climate Change taking Place in person at the Benton and online on the museum's website in spring 2024 onward. Thanks for listening.

Hannah 11:38

Thank you for listening. Check out the show notes for more information about the topics covered in this episode, and for a link to the William Benton Museum of Art's website.

Alex 11:46

The Benton is the official art museum for the state of Connecticut, and admission is always free for all visitors. The museum is located on the University of Connecticut's Storrs campus, and is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., but make sure to check the website for updated hours before you arrive. We encourage you to visit!

Hannah 12:07

The Seeing Climate Change podcast is a production of the fall 2023 cohort of the digital, Media and Design and History Departments' course, "Collaborating with Cultural Institutions," taught by Professor Clarissa Ceglie. This podcast was produced in collaboration with the William Benton Museum of Art and with the support of WHUS radio. The series theme music was composed and performed by our own Alexander Filippides.

Alex 12:33

Before we sign off, we hope that you will check out the other episodes in this series. Thank you again and see you in the next episode.