

Essay

Preserving the Picturesque: Perceptions of Landscape, Landscape Art, and Land Protection in the United States and China

Aaron M. Ellison

Harvard Forest, Harvard University, 324 North Main Street, Petersham, MA 01366, USA;

E-Mail: aellison@fas.harvard.edu; Tel.: +1-978-724-3302; Fax: +1-978-724-3595

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Abstract: The predominant environmental consciousness in both the United States and China reflects an underlying sense of separation of people from nature. Likewise, traditional landscape paintings in the United States and China share a common underlying aesthetic—*i.e.*, the “picturesque”. Together, these similarities appear to have led to the preservation of similar types of landscapes in both countries. Because decisions regarding landscape preservation and subsequent management of preserved areas in both countries reflect aesthetic preferences more than they reflect economic values placed on ecosystem services, contemporary artists have an opportunity to help shape future societal decisions regarding what natural areas to conserve and protect.

Keywords: aesthetics; conservation; land protection; landscape art; picturesque; sublime

1. Introduction

“No work of art can be great, but as it deceives; to be otherwise is the prerogative of nature only” [1] (p. 59).

Land and landscapes are “preserved”—protected from future development—for a wide variety of reasons. Some reasons are utilitarian: the protected land may provide a specific service, such as a source of clean water or merchantable timber, for which it is less costly to maintain the land in its undeveloped state than it would be to (try to) recreate that service elsewhere [2–4]. Other reasons derive from how the land or landscape reminds us of particular aspects of a regional or national culture or particular events in history, e.g., cultural landscapes reflect long-term interactions between people

and “nature”: non-anthropogenic structures, organisms, and processes [5,6]. Still others reflect aesthetic or spiritual values. For example, in the United States (U.S.), the National Park Service Organic Act established the National Park Service to manage, promote, and regulate National Parks (including National Monuments and National Reservations) so as “to conserve the scenery and the natural historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” ([7,8], emphasis added). And sacred groves—stands of trees of religious importance—are protected throughout the world (often, however, without formal legal status) and repeatedly have been shown to harbor high levels of biological diversity [9,10].

The importance that an aesthetic appreciation of “picturesque” landscapes has had in determining priorities for land protection in the United States cannot be underestimated [8,11]. During the early development of landscape architecture in mid-19th century Europe and North America, the “picturesque” was characterized by forms and arrangements that conveyed a sense of the sublime, raw power of a capricious, uncaring natural world [12]. But within 30 years, the picturesque had been reconceived as settled, graceful, soft, or luxuriant, as in the rolling, cultivated hills of northeastern North America [13] or the settled and tamed British “countryside” [14]. Both of these competing visions of the picturesque have been used to identify landscapes in need of protection and preservation.

Some studies have suggested that there is an evolved preference for a particular landscape types—open savannahs or grasslands with few scattered trees [15–17] or thick boreal forests [18]. Additional covariates examined in the latter study further suggested that preferences for particular habitats was not likely to be innate, and that preference for and perception of scenic beauty was not specific to a given habitat or biome type [18]. I and others have asserted that contemporary aesthetic preferences for particular landscape types is not innate, but derives from a constructed vision of idealized landscapes developed by 19th century writers and artists that reflects a combination of the sublime and the (later version of) the picturesque [19–22]. Similar aesthetic ideals underlie international conservation efforts, including UNESCO’s Geoparks [23] and The Nature Conservancy’s Last Great Places initiative [24]. This aesthetic is rarely challenged [22,25], but it is important to note that it has evolved through time. Visitors to many U.S. National Parks, Biosphere Reserves, and National Geoparks around the world today encounter an amalgamation of the Romantic Movement’s picturesque refracted through designed landscapes informed by mid-20th century modernist architecture [26] (Figure 1) or unobtrusive maintenance of historically-derived cultural landscapes [4].

In North America and Western Europe, the 19th century Romantic Movement’s picturesque aesthetic, as exemplified by the Hudson River School painters [21], also presents a vision of “nature” apart from people and outside of human influence [22]. Callicott *et al.* [27] identified this sense of separation of humans from nature as the appropriate context for nature reserves and conservation of biological diversity and biological integrity. Following from Callicott *et al.* [27], Jordan and Lubick asserted that our sense of separation from nature also is a necessary prerequisite for ecosystem restoration [28]. However, both this sense of separation from nature, and its importance for land protection is contested [25].

Figure 1. (top) The Observation Tower at Shark Valley, Everglades National Park. **(bottom)** View from the Observation Tower at Shark Valley, Everglades National Park. The tower was designed by Edward M. Ghezzi and was opened to visitors in 1966. It is a classic example of the modernist constructions that were part of the Mission 66 agenda [26]. Photographs © 2014 by Aaron M. Ellison and Elizabeth J. Farnsworth, and used with permission.



In particular, it is often asserted that the separation of humans from nature (compositionism *sensu* [27]) is tied to Judeo-Christian traditions, whereas inclusion of humans within nature (functionalism *sensu* [27]) is part and parcel of Daoist and some Buddhist traditions [29]. Polinska [30] and Scott [31], for example, argued that the nature aesthetic of East Asian painting follows these latter traditions, and thus provide new, or at least complementary, approaches to environmental preservation. Whereas Scott [31] emphasized that these ideas and approaches were unique to the particular philosophers and literati painters themselves in the context and at the times they were painting,

Ames [32] asserted that Taoism as a philosophical whole proceeds from art rather than science, and provides a different (*i.e.*, non-Western) basis for redefining the nature of nature inseparable from people. In contrast, Elvin [33] suggested that our perception that that Daoist and Buddhist traditions have driven environmental awareness in China misreads the historical record. Rather, the many Chinese artists and poets who have expressed a functionalist interpretation in arguing for what we would now view as a conservation aesthetic were reacting to a mainstream paradigm of human use and dominance over nature deriving from a Confucian tradition [31,33–35]. Nonetheless, there is much that can be learned from non-Confucian traditions to inform contemporary environmental awareness [30–32,35].

Elvin's notion [36] that both “Western” (Judeo-Christian; at least in post-Medieval times) and Chinese perceptions of nature share, at least in large measure, a general, compositionalist perspective on the relationship between humans and nature [28] may be reflected in artistic portrayals of “landscapes” [21–33,37]. Traditions of landscape paintings generally pre-date efforts to protect and conserve the landscapes themselves; the protection of the Yellow Mountain (Huangshan: 黄山) in Anhui Province by the Song Emperor Qinzong in 10th century China is a notable exception (discussed further in Section 3.2, below) that further supports this assertion [38].

Drawing on examples from the United States and China, I argue that the two countries share a common aesthetic conception of nature—which I refer to below as “picturesque” *without anachronistic intention*—and that this cultural conditioning has led to the preservation of similar types of landscapes in both countries. I conclude that decisions regarding landscape preservation and subsequent management of preserved areas in both countries reflect an underlying sense of separation of people from nature, and that contemporary artists have an opportunity to help shape future societal decisions regarding what natural areas to conserve and how to protect them.

2. A Peopled Nature Leads to a Nature Apart from People

The idea of “nature”, and certainly a nature in need of protection, appears to have progressed hand-in-hand with the shift from hunting and gathering to agrarian settlement and “civilization” [33,35,39]. Although there may yet exist a true “wilderness” in the sense of a self-willed place with its own volition [40]—and contemporary sacred groves, which still are conceived of as abodes of deities, animistic spirits, and other supernatural powers [41] may be all that remain of such true wildernesses—what we now think of wilderness is more clearly conceived of as a human construct [39]. In both the U.S. and China, as the frontier disappeared, there has grown a sense that there was still a “natural” landscape somewhere else, and that if we could find it, we should protect it.

2.1. Nature as an Expression of the Sublime

Early expressions of “natural” landscapes can be found in paintings that illustrate the sublime [1]: the “*frisson of fear that comes from confronting something more powerful than oneself*” [42] (p. 105) as well as sensations of wonder, awe, or terror [43] (p. 109). A key attraction of wilderness is its sense of wildness [39,40], and especially the possibility that we are not in complete control of nature or secure in our place at the top of the food chain (but see [44]).

Western Romantic Movement landscape painting intentionally conveyed a sense of the sublime: landscapes are active, with vast geological features, churning water, dramatic clouds or thunderheads,

and continuous interplay of light and shadows over all of these features [45] (Figure 2). People, if present at all in the paintings, are small.

Figure 2. *The Chasm of the Colorado* (1873–1874) by Thomas Moran. Oil on canvas, 213.4 × 365.8 cm; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Lent by the Department of the Interior Museum L.1968.84.2. This painting, which has many classical elements of the sublime, was appropriately described as an “appalling chaos of cliffs and chasms” [45] (p. 700).



Chinese visions of the sublime share a similar vocabulary [46]. As early as the 3rd century BCE, the poet Song Yu (宋玉 Sung Yü in earlier literature) wrote in the Gaotang fu (高唐赋 Kao-t'ang fu in earlier literature) (translation from [47]) (pp. 415–416):

*The splendor of the Wu mountain is matchless,
 Paths carve and pile, one on another.
 Climb the cliffs and look down—
 There the waters surge near the great slope.
 After the rain, the sky clears—
 Now see the assemblage of streams!
 The roar of the rushing waters is deafening
 As the torrents churn and race to their source.*

...

*Great waves overflow the banks.
 Rushing, leaping, they strike at one another,
 And rise like clouds in a clash of sound.*

...

Landscape painting in China emerged several centuries later: both Soper [46] and Lee [37] identify early examples in the mid-5th century CE. These not only express concepts of the sublime, including sheer mountain peaks, clouds, the “*mystery of the Dark Spirit of the Universe*” [46] (p. 164), and the transience of life, but also “picturesque” scenes of landscapes and romance (Figure 3; [48]).

Figure 3. *Nymph of the Luo River* (detail) (5th century, but probably a Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) copy) attributed to Gu Kaizhi (顧愷之 Ku K'ai-chih in earlier translations). From a hand-scroll in Beijing's Palace Museum (image in the public domain) [48].



2.2. Taming the Sublime in the Picturesque

In North America, the “closing” of the western frontier in the 19th century was accompanied both by a growing romanticizing of the frontier itself and by the recognition that the “wilderness” needed to be protected from untrammelled exploitation. Indeed, one of the key arguments for the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in California was that it should not suffer the same fate (*i.e.*, of commercialization) as Niagara Falls in New York [49] (Figure 4).

In many 19th century landscape paintings, both of the settled eastern part of the country and the western “frontier”, there is ample evidence of civilization, including human settlement, activity, and even resource extraction or landscape transformation. Examples include the (self-referential) painter overlooking the agrarian landscape in Thomas Cole’s *Oxbow* [50] (Figure 5) and the railroad tracks above Donner Lake in Albert Bierstadt’s *Donner Lake from the Summit* (Figure 6).

Both paintings are filled with irony. Cole’s *Oxbow* depicts a landscape that had been settled and farmed for almost 200 years from a viewpoint that appears wild but was already a popular tourist destination with a flourishing hotel (located just off-canvas to the left). It also portrays nature as he wished to see it, not as it really was—the oxbow in the painting was nearly cut off from the main stem

of the Connecticut River by the time he painted *The Oxbow*. Bierstadt painted the mountain pass in the High Sierras that was the site of the loss, in the winter of 1846–1847, of more than half of the Donner party, a group of pioneers from the eastern and Midwestern U.S. aiming to settle in California [51]. It is also the point at which the emerging transcontinental railroad reached its highest point crossing the Rocky Mountains. The juxtapositions in both *The Oxbow* and *Donner Lake* simultaneously recall a sublime past and point towards a settled future in which nature can be viewed and appreciated from a the balcony of a well-appointed hotel room or from the window of a railroad dining car moving rapidly through the landscape (Figure 6).

Figure 4. *Niagara Falls* (1818) by Louisa Davis Minot. Oil on linen, 76.2 × 103.2 cm; Gift of Mrs. Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Sr., to the Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Jr., Collection. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, Object 156.4. In the early 19th century, Niagara Falls was considered the epitome of the overwhelming sublime, but the tourists walking the rocks clad in fine suits or dresses indicates this landscape was already tamed and accessible [21]. Image © The New-York Historical Society. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The New-York Historical Society.



Figure 5. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836), by Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 130.8 × 193 cm. Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage; Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This painting includes classical elements of the sublime on the left (twisted trees, a thunderstorm) and a vision of the cultivated picturesque on the right [50]. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Similarly, as China was settled and its landscape transformed from northeast to southwest beginning at least 3000 years ago, increasing laments for lost plants, animals, and natural landscapes increasingly appear in poetry [33]. At the beginning of the 9th century (CE), the poet Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元 Liu Tsung-yuan in earlier translations) summarized the growing swath of historical deforestation in a political allegory ([52] translation in [33] (p. 19)):

*The official guardians' axes have spread through a thousand hills,
At the Works Department's order hacking rafter-beams and billets.
Of ten trunks cut in the woodlands' depths, only one gets hauled away.
Ox-teams strain at their traces—'til the paired yoke-shafts break.
Great-girthed trees of towering height lie blocking the forest tracks,
A tumbled confusion of lumber, as flames on the hillside crackle.
Not even the last remaining shrubs are safeguarded from destruction;
Where once the mountain torrents leapt—nothing but rotted gullies.*

*Timbers, not yet seasoned or used, left immature to rot;
Proud summits and deep-sunk gorges now—brief hummocks of naked rock.*

Figure 6. *Donner Lake from the Summit* (1873), by Albert Bierstadt. Oil on canvas, 183.2 × 305.3 cm. Gift of Archer Milton Huntington; Collection of the New-York Historical Society, Object 1909.16. As with Cole's *Oxbow*, this painting includes many classical elements of the sublime: twisted or shattered trees; a sparkling lake and clouds; mountains; and a rising or setting sun. Note the covered railroad track as it traverses the Donner Pass in the center right of the painting. Image © The New-York Historical Society. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The New-York Historical Society.



The mature landscape paintings of the Song (Figure 7) and Yuan Dynasties [53] illustrate this vision in “*deliberate opposition to the standards of civilized mankind*” [46] (p. 164) (see also [33,35]). A later landscape painter, Shi Tao (石涛 Shih T’ao in earlier translations; 1642–1707) referred to the sublime elements of Ni Zan’s paintings (e.g., Figure 7): “*Their air of supreme refinement and purity is so cold that it overawes men.*” [54] (p. 43).

Figure 7. Detail of *Water and Bamboo Dwelling* (Yuan Dynasty era: 1271–1368) by Ni Zan (倪瓒 Ni Tsan in earlier translations; 1301–1374). Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 53.6 × 27.7 cm; Collection of the National Museum of China (image in the public domain). Note the small scale of the dwelling (as in Hudson River School paintings) and the deforested hills in the background.



3. Scenic Visions Guide Preservation

In the United States, the creation of National Parks beginning in the late 19th century and the establishment in the early 20th century of a National Park Service to manage them coincided with the closing of the western frontier. At that time, the western U.S., where the first National Parks were set aside and where they still predominate today, already was being settled while natural areas were being mined, deforested, and developed. But the temporal and spatial extents of these landscape changes were very small compared to the millennia of landscape changes that had occurred in China long before either a landscape aesthetic had developed or the idea of conservation and land protection had emerged [33,35]. In the United States, an early 20th century inventory of preserved and preservable areas in North America could easily identify and describe natural areas that could serve as reference states for biological systems unaffected by people [55]. In contrast, although potential land-cover types can be identified for China [56], it seems virtually impossible that there were areas of China untransformed by people by the time the first Chinese nature reserve—Dinghushan (鼎湖山) National Nature Reserve—was established in 1956. Nevertheless, similar motivations underpin land protection efforts in both countries.

3.1. Scenery as Landscape Architecture in the United States National Parks

As noted in the Introduction, the 1916 legislation (the Organic Act) establishing the U.S. National Park Service emphasized the importance of conserving the scenery of the parks so that it could be enjoyed by the general public. Although the Organic Act also required that the scenery (and wildlife) be left “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”, the management of the U.S. National Parks has almost always prioritized scenery and the visitors’ experience over keeping them in an unimpaired state [8,57]. This idea has its roots in landscape architecture. In discussing the management of what eventually was to become Yosemite National Park, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead wrote in 1865:

“...(t)he enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system” [58].

Shortly after the National Park Service was established, the Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Lane, in a letter to Stephen Mather, the first director of the Service, identified three broad principles to guide the creation and management of National Parks: that the parks be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for future generations; that they are set apart for the pleasure of the people; and that the national interest must dictate all decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks [59]. In spite of the first principle (absolute unimpairment), cattle grazing was permitted, trees could be cut for constructing buildings or “to improve the scenic features of the parks”; construction of roads, trails, and buildings should be harmonized with the landscape and be done by “trained engineers who either possess a knowledge of landscape architecture or have a proper appreciation of the esthetic value of park lands”; automobiles were permitted in all parks, and railroads should be employed to allow the public to comfortably reach the parks [59]. The suggestion regarding the railroads reflected the importance that the owners of the 19th century railroad companies had in fanning the flames of interest in the western landscape—for example, the Northern Pacific Railroad Company subsidized landscape painter Thomas Moran’s trip to the Yellowstone region (Figure 8)—and in successfully lobbying for the establishment of Yellowstone National Park [57].

Whether existing parklands can be preserved unimpaired while roads and hotels are built, trees are cut, or cattle are grazed continues to vex National Park management [8,26,57]. At the same time, however, Lane wrote that:

“In studying new park projects, you should seek to find scenery of supreme and distinctive quality or some national feature so extraordinary or unique as to be of national interest and importance. You should seek distinguished examples of typical forms of world architecture; such, for instance, as the Grand Canyon, as exemplifying the highest accomplishment of stream erosion, and the high, rugged portion of Mount Desert Island as exemplifying the oldest rock forms in America and the luxuriance of deciduous forests” ([59]; emphasis added).

In short, the importance of scenery—and scenery as landscape architecture to be enjoyed by all—was, and remains, the *raison d'être* of identification, establishment, and management of U.S. National Parks.

Figure 8. *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1872) by Thomas Moran. Oil on canvas, 213.4 × 365.8 cm; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Lent by the Department of the Interior Museum L.1968.84.1.



3.2. Landscape Protection in China

The People's Republic of China has three main types of protected areas: forest parks, nature reserves, and scenic areas. In the last decade, through collaboration with The Nature Conservancy, China has designated at least two pilot national parks [56], but as yet these have little resonance with or meaning to the general public as a “conservation area” in China [60]. Nature reserves (自然保护区) are areas protected for wildlife, flora, or landscape features of special interest. Forest parks (森林公园) are areas specifically aimed at protecting forests and forest resources. Scenic areas (景区) are protected for outstanding natural and scenic values, but they are not supposed to overlap with forest parks or nature reserves [56]. Nature reserves, forest parks, and scenic areas all are open to tourism. Scenic areas are the most frequently visited by Chinese tourists but provide less protection of “natural” landscapes than do nature reserves; the nascent National Parks are meant to provide an intermediate level of protection and visitation, and at the same time demonstrate that they can raise revenue by attracting international tourists who are more familiar with the idea of a “national park” [56].

China has fewer scenic areas than either nature reserves or forest parks, which suggests that they are both more difficult to site (national scenic areas must be at least 50 km² in size) and more highly prized. But at the national level, all three types of protected areas must have high scenic value. Among the current inventory of protected areas, the Dinghushan Nature Reserve was the first established (see below). But scenic areas have long been appreciated and, in some instances, protected well before the

establishment in 1949 of the the People’s Republic of China. For example, Huangshan has appeared in poetry and landscape painting for over 1000 years (Figure 9) [61]; is one of the key inspirations for the Shanshui (山水 mountain-water) school of landscape painting; and was first protected in the 12th century [38].

Figure 9. *Huangshan* (ca. 1670) by Shi Tao (image in the public domain) [61].



Its dozens of temples (Figure 9), unique flora and fauna, and magnificent scenery provided three criteria for Huangshan’s listing as a World Heritage site [62]. UNESCO reported that Huangshan had nearly 3 million visitors in the 1990s, and expected that number to increase at ~10% per year; by 2007 that number had increased to *ca.* 15 million visitors [63]; classical scenery is clearly a major attraction.

Landscapes protected for both their historical and aesthetic values are referred to as 风水林 (Fengshui lin; literally “Wind-water forests”. Fengshui (“wind-water”) refers to the system of geomancy that harmonizes humans with their surrounding environments. It is widely used in Chinese landscape architecture to design homes, commercial structures, palaces, and tombs, among many other built environments [64]); Dinghushan is an outstanding example. Now widely recognized for its centuries-old forest and biological diversity [65], Dinghushan also is the site of two important Buddhist temples, the Tang Dynasty-era (618–907 CE) Baiyun Temple (白云寺) and the Ming Dynasty-era (1368–1644 CE) Qingyun Temple (庆云寺). Buddhist temples in southern China often protected the forests surrounding them [35], and the combination of these temples surrounded by relatively undisturbed (sub)tropical forests, dramatic mountains, waterfalls, and lakes led both to its protection as a national reserve and as one of the first designated (in 1979) UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (and first Biosphere Reserve in China) [35,66].

The core area of the Dinghushan reserve has the most undisturbed forest and is off-limits to visitors other than scientific researchers. The majority of visitors to Dinghushan come for the scenery created by the juxtaposition of the temples, forests, and mountain (Figures 10 and 11); an inscription at the Qingyun complex states: (T)he temple on the renowned mountain/creates picturesque scenery [67] (p. 226).

Figure 10. *Dinghushan Tourist Information Kiosk (2013).* Photograph © 2014 by Aaron M. Ellison and used with permission.



Figure 11. *Qingyun Temple at Dinghushan (2013).* The temple gates frame the mountains beyond. Photograph © 2014 by Aaron M. Ellison and used with permission.



The close proximity of Dinghushan to the mega-city of Guangzhou (the tourist map (Figure 10) claims it is the “nearest virgin forest from a city in the world”) ensures a steady stream of visitors. UNESCO estimated 1 million people per year in 1997 [66], and that number has probably increased at least 10-fold in the intervening years. As in the U.S. National Parks, the vast majority arrive on motorized vehicles (Figure 12) [59], take bus-tours to scenic vistas (Figure 10), walk well-maintained trails with interpretive signs that make visible the important aspects of nature [67], and buy food and souvenirs from hundreds of vendors or at the well-appointed restaurant with dramatic views from many of the tables within the Qingyun temple.

Figure 12. *Near the entrance to Dinghushan (2013).* Photograph © 2014 by Aaron M. Ellison and used with permission.



4. Moving Forward: Landscape Aesthetics and Land Protection in the 21st Century

In the U.S., the aesthetic developed and elaborated by the 19th century Romantic Movement painters of the Hudson River School remains popular among the general public [22], who also continue in large numbers to enjoy the scenery of national parks. But in the 20th and 21st centuries, landscape art in the U.S. and Western Europe moved on through Modernism and Post-Modernism, and currently expresses a new stance that further identifies and portrays the destruction of nature by people [22]. The U.S. National Park system was well established by the mid-20th century, by which time the National Park Service also had embraced Modernism in its management and focused visitors' attention on iconic scenery viewed in or from comfortable surroundings [26]. Behind the scenes, however, park stewardship has evolved towards a fuller realization of Leopold's land aesthetic [20], epitomized by allowing “natural processes” such as fire to take their course (e.g., the Yellowstone Fire of 1988 [68]). The tensions between scenic and ecological aesthetics in park management [8,20,69] presents new opportunities for artists to re-imagine how people interact with nature and re-engage with an increasingly urban populace rediscovering nature both within and outside of cities [22].

In contemporary China, the aesthetic of landscape painting developed during the Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties, between the 7th and 14th centuries CE, similarly inspires landscape conservation practices. The existing reserve system in China and its nascent National Parks take advantage of lessons learned from National Park systems in the U.S. and elsewhere as China develops parks that simultaneously maintain ecological values that allow visitors to appreciate classical scenic vistas, support ecosystem services (e.g., preservation of biodiversity, functioning wetlands [2]), and generate revenue from tourism [56]. As in U.S. National Parks, contemporary visitors to China's parks and reserves focus primarily on the scenery and cultural heritage; the biodiversity and ecological research in core areas is off-limits to the general public. And as in the West, contemporary Chinese artists such as Xu Bing reflect and refine a traditional aesthetic as they interpret modern landscapes [70] (Figure 13(left, center)). Hints of the Post-Modernist critique apparent in 21st century Western landscape painting also emerge in Xu Bing's work: his ironic interpretation of Shi Tao's classic painting *Landscape Painted on the Double Ninth Festival* is constructed of trash and debris (Figure 13(center, right)). Similarly, the Chinese photographer Yao Lu creates classical (Song and Yuan-era)-looking landscapes from photographs of landfills and polluted waterways [71], while the American artist Paul Jacobsen juxtaposes mountains of trash with "real" mountains [22].

Burke found the sublime in nature, not in the built environment [1]; but see [38]. In the United States in the 19th century, as in China centuries earlier, landscape painters communicated this concept to a broader audience and defined an aesthetic whose influence defined the language of landscape protection decades to centuries in the future. The Hudson River School painters in the U.S. and philosopher/scholar painters of the Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties in China were widely respected, and the messages conveyed by their paintings were broadly understood and appreciated in village homes, capitals and capitols, and palaces. There is now less interaction between artists and the general public, however, and contemporary aesthetics appear to have little impact on decisions made about land protection or broader conservation agendas [69]. Rather than creating and defining a new common aesthetic, "*(modern landscape) (p)aintings express the painter, whose style is idiosyncratic*" [72]. At the same time, new efforts to bring artists together with scientists and the general public are creating new opportunities to influence the decisions being made to protect and conserve natural landscapes [73–75]. As these efforts bear fruit, we are likely to witness new opportunities for conservation and land protection based on an aesthetic of a rapidly changing world [22].

Figure 13. (Left) *Landscape Painted on the Double Ninth Festival (Detail)* (1705) by Shi Tao. Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper, 71.6 × 42.2 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981.285.13. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. **(Center)** *Background Story 8 (Front)* and **(Right)** *Background Story 8 (Rear)*; (2012) by Xu Bing. Trash and natural debris attached to frosted acrylic panel, 762 × 365.8 × 213.4 cm; Exhibited at MassMoCA, 2012–2013; Photographs (center and right) by Aaron M. Ellison (as permitted by the MassMoCA) and used with permission.



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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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