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Thomas Moran and the American Mountain Vision



'The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone', 1872. (*Smithsonian Institution*)

During a period of some 50 years from 1825 to 1875 an artistic movement grew in America that had its foundations in European Romanticism but was inspired by the wilderness in the locality of New York State's Hudson river. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s there occurred 'a period of expansion and consolidation for the native school named for the Hudson River'¹ whereby a generation of artist-adventurers would travel and record mountain scenery from the White Mountains to the Rockies and to the Andes of South America. While Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) ventured west to record sunlit scenes in Yosemite, it was Thomas Moran who entered the heart of the continent, taking his 'Hudson River' aesthetics first into Wyoming, then across Colorado, to create the definitive images of the mythic 'West' that would influence both photographers and filmmakers in years to come.

The American painter Thomas Moran (1837-1926) arrived in the United States in 1844 at the age of seven from Bolton, Lancashire to settle in Philadelphia where his father was a textile weaver. Later, as an art student of James Hamilton (1819-78) and greatly influenced by him, Moran developed a style that reflected the Romantic landscape tradition that flourished in

1. B D Yaeger, *The Hudson River School*, Smithmark, New York, 1996, p37.

Europe, dominated by the paintings of Turner and the writings of Ruskin both of whom he admired and respected.

He became one of the many artists to be linked with the great surveys of the United States interior organised by the American government but he, above all others, became the most associated with and closely related to his subject matter, to the extent that by the end of the 19th century 'his landscape views, especially those of Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, were recognized as the definitive treatments of those wonders.'²

In 1864 an Act of Congress had established Yosemite Valley as a place of special significance for the nation, but the wilderness could not venerate itself; 'it needed hallowing visitations from ... painters in oil like Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, and painters in prose like John Muir to represent it as a holy park of the West.'³

In the period after the American Civil War it was recognised that the nation required some form of stylised unification, some logo, badge or emblem to bond the people and provoke a sense of forward momentum, even destiny. It may be argued that the Revolutionary War of 1776-83 created the United States but the American Civil War of 1861-5 determined the kind of nation it would become. The destruction of towns, property and economic infrastructure linked with the loss of 625,000 lives resulted in a long and painful process of rebuilding a united nation. The quest to establish some kind of image had, in a sense, been symbolised in the past by the movement westward of settlers and the discovery of new lands, forests, plains and mountains. That mountains could 'act as barriers that constitute the natural limits of the nations they encircle; and as an environment that gives birth to specific peoples'⁴ were the aspects that fired the expeditions of the 1870s and gave rise to the emblemizing of the West as a continuing American challenge, the reinvigoration of a national identity, and a powerful incentive for commerce and industry to seize the opportunities for new investment.

From 1867 to 1879 the United States government organised four expeditions in the West that have become known as the Great Surveys due to their wide geographical range, their long duration, and the comprehensive nature of their research. They were funded by the Department of War, the Department of the Interior, the Smithsonian Institution and private industry that had a vested interest in aspects of the projects. Soil types, rock structures, ores and mineral deposits, and fossil remains were all sought, noted and classified alongside the charting of the landscape, while aspects of climate, water resources and transport routes through remote areas were also recorded.

The United States recognised that 'the ability of mountain landscapes to emblemize the national imaginary encouraged protection measures that designated them as national parks'⁵ and reawakened the spirit of adventure

2. J Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1992, p6.

3. S Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Fontana, London, 1996, p7.

4. B Debarbieux and G Rudaz, *The Mountain*, Chicago University Press, 2015, p76.

5. *Ibid*, p104.

that would make these suggested national parks permanent national treasures. From the outset the governing feature was 'an attempt to find nobility in an uncivilised region'⁶ and the establishment of national parks and the formation of federal forests created a people's wilderness, both psychologically and physically, which, at the same time, fostered the growth of commercialism and tourism in those wild places.

Moran was 34 when he joined the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories and travelled west to Wyoming and the Yellowstone region. Two years later he joined a government survey to the Grand Canyon led by John Wesley Powell and the following year, in 1874, he was again involved in survey work in Colorado. The artwork developed from these expeditions became the basis for the rest of his career to the point that he adopted the nickname 'Yellowstone' and established a monogrammed symbol on his canvases indicating the work of Tom 'Yellowstone' Moran. His prolific output of western mountain landscape paintings and related drawings and prints secured him fame and a considerable fortune. This allowed him to travel to Europe, Mexico and the eastern United States where he also produced many fine paintings but those of the American West and its mountains embody his most substantial influence on American art.

The Hayden Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories was not the first expedition to enter the Yellowstone region. Known by mountaineers, in the original sense, trappers, traders and soldiers as well as indigenous peoples, it was first explored by John Colter of the Lewis and Clark Expedition who returned to the area in 1807-8 and sent back descriptions that augmented the district's already mythic qualities. More serious expeditions returned annually from 1869-71, fired by the traveller's tales that arrived back east. Ferdinand Hayden's survey was in its fifth year when Moran joined it on its way to Yellowstone. All manner of information was required covering all aspects of geological science alongside different forms of visual record: sketches and prints, drawings, paintings and photographs.

'The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone'⁷ brought Moran to public prominence in 1872 when his large canvas, 7ft x 12ft, became the first American landscape by an American painter to be purchased by the United States government. The painting is a formidable image depicting both the range of the country before him and its inherent power centred on the falls pouring into the vast defile and sending up a cloud of spray into the valley. The viewer is channelled towards the off-centre falls, the massive walls of the valley and the succession of pillar-like rock towers and tall trees directing the eye towards the cascade. The colour structure enhances this movement, leading us from the darker foreground into the yellow and cream light of the rock scenery in the central valley to be held at the heart of the gorge by a shadowed area whose light core is the waterfall itself. Distance and verticality are the keynotes, but the scale of the image is greatly enhanced by the

6. Kinsey, p23.

7. 'The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone', 1872, oil on canvas, 213cm x 266cm, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



'The Chasm of the Colorado', 1873-4. (*Smithsonian Institution*)

inclusion of diminutive figures in the foreground: some recording the scene and others looking out over the vastness of the rock landscape. Thanks to Moran's painting, the Yellowstone ceased to be a sulphurous place of infernal mystery but was transformed into a haven of natural wonder, stirring the American imagination. Well beyond the geographical and geological importance of the area, the minds of Americans were opened to the interior of their own country as an area of thrilling danger and challenge, of inspiration and fulfilment, an image promised a more positive view of the future.

The expedition of 1873 led by John Wesley Powell, a one-armed Civil War veteran who had been exploring the Colorado river and its tributaries since 1867, furnished the production of 'The Chasm of the Colorado'⁸ unveiled in 1874. Powell's 'sympathetic studies of native Americans and his scientific and practical theory of arid land management'⁹ contributed a vast amount to America's understanding of the West and the visual impact of Moran's canvas animated the government and inspired further exploration. This painting was also purchased by Congress to hang in the Capitol opposite the Yellowstone canvas where its similar size allows a dramatic counterpoint to the earlier picture. Where the Yellowstone revealed a spectacular vast valley, the Colorado displays the immense panorama of fold after fold of stunning rock scenery, rendered with a strong natural accuracy, as it stretches off into the distance where cloud and rainstorms stop the eye from being lost in the huge expanse of stone structures that disclose the enormity of the landscape. The immediate foreground is painted in a mid-tone, followed directly in the middle distance by deeper, darker tones backed by sunlit rock faces. This creates a tonal structure similar to the Yellowstone canvas where the land unfolds into the distance, leading the eye and the imagination beyond the

8. 'The Chasm of the Colorado'. 1873-4, oil on canvas, 214cm x 267cm, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

9. Kinsey, p99.



'Mountain of the Holy Cross', 1875.



Napoleon Sarony's portrait of Thomas Moran, from Bolton to the American West.

limits of the image. Like the Yellowstone canvas this too displays a surety of handling and a rendering of illusionistic spatial depth that is almost breathtaking. The Grand Canyon's arid characteristics, the dearth of vegetation, are brought to the fore, but his juxtaposition of storm, rainbow, river and canyon convey the land's latent power, its harshness and tension, and also offer an invitation to explore, to see for oneself the grandeur that was part of the frontier. In America, it seems to say, anything is possible.

In 1874 Moran joined a further Hayden expedition in Colorado where they had succeeded the previous year, after considerable difficulties, in surveying the Mountain of the Holy Cross. This almost legendary mountain with its unique central gully crossed two thirds of the way up by a broad horizontal ledge creating a perfect cruciform feature, was hidden deep in the Colorado Rockies. The painting Moran fashioned, the 'Mountain of the Holy Cross',¹⁰ was different in several respects. The canvas is vertical as opposed to the two previous large horizontal paintings. Scale and vast grandeur were again related but this time the remoteness of the location and the arduous nature of travel in the area were implied: he reveals a trackless waste that can only be accessed by following a boulder-strewn, timber-choked river high in the mountains. Above this, beyond source and tributaries, rises the Mountain of the Holy Cross dominating the surrounding peaks and dwarfing the river landscape. The composition is centred on the river

10. 'Mountain of the Holy Cross'. 1875, Oil on canvas, 210.2cm X 164.5cm. The Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, Los Angeles.

where strong, skilful rendering of rock, wood and water textures fill the valley with a naturalistic execution that leads the eye to the head of the valley where, cradled in mist, sits the mysterious mountain dominated by its uniquely Christian symbol. Overshadowing the canvas are allusions to suffering and salvation. The painting's composition suggests the journey to the mountain will not be easy: the foot of the cross will only be attained by effort, confrontation and personal transition. This was certainly true for those involved in the survey but it also stands not only as a metaphor for those seeking release or liberation in their own lives but also as a vital directional image for a nation searching for reconciliation with its recent past.

The tradition of the sublime in nature had been established in Europe as far back as the 17th century and Moran made great use of dramatic examples of landscapes, just as his predecessors had, 'where objects and scenes are noted not only for what they are but also for what they are like.'¹¹ The dynamic storms and atmospheric effects, the gorges and precipitous rock scenery, the majestic waterfalls and luminous rainbows all stood as metaphors for a land at once magnificent and splendid but also blessed and charged with a cosmic association. Where Bierstadt had flooded his Yosemite canvases with these qualities he had done so with a series of atmospheric impressions and powerful sunlit effects that all too often said more about Bierstadt and his attitude to painting than the vertical rock walls of Yosemite. Moran's approach was more considered and realistic while still bound within the Romantic tradition. Features could be enhanced, lone pines introduced, thunder clouds rearranged and tonal shifts in colour accommodated, but the actual structure of the land was allowed to remain, and to reflect its own power and grandeur. Beyond all else Moran sought to convey a sense of place from scenes far from the frontiers of common experience, to relate an encounter with a wilderness that did not rely on accentuation or pictorial effects but boldly displayed the splendour and dignity of the American West; a land of sparse vegetation, desert scenery, strange geological features, dramatic colours and seemingly measureless open spaces that bound the depicted landscape but still promised further discoveries.

Thomas Moran, perhaps more than any other painter, 'played a decisive role in awakening sensitivity to scenic views and in exerting pressure on political and administrative institutions'¹² to protect singular areas of outstanding beauty throughout America. The United States government recognised the need for symbolic status and 'readily made the mountains an emblematic place, a remarkable scenic landscape, a wild aspect of their territory, an ecological asset, even a reserve for unusual species.'¹³

Moran's images of the West were utilised by many companies seeking to advertise their locale or the beauties of their area; the Union Pacific Railway, the Denver and Rio Grande Railway, the Rocky Mountain Herald, and the US Postal Service all employed images of his work, the latter in the

11. Kinsey, p20.

12. Debarbieux & Rudaz, p104.

13. Debarbieux & Rudaz, p112.

commemorative stamp marking the 75th anniversary of Colorado's statehood. His influence on photographers and cinematographers who worked in the Western genre can be seen especially in the film work of John Houston, while the photography of Ansel Adams followed in this tradition, where he 'did his best to translate his reverence into spectacular nature-icons.'¹⁴

The popularity of Moran's western images reveals both the sympathies of the artist and a great deal about the society they were produced for. His art is not pure fabrication, but neither is it mere documentation. Moran's success was not solely based on his artistic abilities or his opportunities to witness such sights through his connection with the survey; his work does not reveal an American Eden nor is it ever a sentimentalised view of natural grandeur under sunny skies but somehow his large canvases display the personal and cultural battle for a new definition in the West and in America that helped the recreation of the national identity and disclosed its direction into the new century. Moran understood the consequence of the West as a microcosm of American culture and made the West an enduring aspect of the American consciousness.

While Moran's large landscapes of the Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon can still inspire awe in those viewing them today, it is perhaps his greater legacy to us that our sense of place in the world can be heightened and our sense of spirituality enhanced by 'observing nature or landscape paintings ... and to the ways that civilisations have experienced and cultivated that keen awareness of nature and the landscape.'¹⁵ It may be assumed in some quarters that humanities interaction with the mountain environment is a modern phenomenon and based solely on contemporary mountaineering or mountain sports and skiing developments but the thrill of exploration and the lure of travelling into the unknown, the search, consideration and assessment of an expedition into new territories still exerts a powerful spell; a spark, if not ignited then certainly fanned, by Moran and the National Surveys of America of the 1870s.

14. Schama, p9.

15. Debarbieux & Rudaz, p32.