

PICTURESQUE LANDSCAPES

in North American
Illustrated Publications
1800-1900



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Landscape played a key role in the process of national self-definition in both Canada and the United States during the nineteenth century. Lacking ancient ruins and centuries-old cathedrals – symbols of history and identity in Europe – North Americans found in their diverse topographies evidence of the new world's character and destiny. Although exploration and settlement of the West resulted in the latter half of the 1800s in depictions that emphasized the sublimity and grandeur of such natural features as the Rocky Mountains and the Grand Canyon, it was variations on the idea of the tamer Picturesque that dominated North American landscape illustration for much of the century.

John Frederick Kensett, *Catskill Mountain Scenery*, 1852 [12]

Canadian Pacific Railway, "Picturesque Canada" Souvenir Playing Card, n.d. [20]

J. Douglas Woodward, *View from Steeple of Arlington-Street Church*, 1874 [15]





Picturesque Lunenburg, 1899 [18]

The Picturesque was first articulated by the British clergyman, writer, and artist William Gilpin, for whom the ideal landscape was characterized by irregularity and variety arranged within a harmonious and poetically evocative composition. He popularized this concept in *An Essay upon Prints* (1768) [1], and his many renditions of picturesque views proved influential to amateur and professional artists on both sides of the Atlantic for decades to come [2]. As was argued by the New Yorker Charles Brockden Brown, editor of the *Monthly Magazine* in 1799 and 1800 and the *Literary Magazine and American Register* from 1803 to 1807, Gilpin's writings "ought to be perfectly familiar to every mind endowed with virtuous propensities and pure taste."

Writers and artists were quick to investigate the picturesque qualities latent in North American scenery. Isaac Weld's text and images for his *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* [3] explored the aesthetic potential of the natural surroundings. George Heriot, British North America's deputy postmaster general until his return to London in 1816, documented Upper and Lower Canada in views imbued with the picturesque aesthetic that he had likely learned from the artist Paul Sandby at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich [4]. In the United States, a thriving admiration of picturesque landscape was established in the 1820s and '30s by authors such as William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, and by the painter Thomas Cole and his fellow Hudson River School artists. The work of these artists offered variety, irregularity, and movement (flowing water was a favourite motif) in unified compositions bounded by trees and other framing devices that limited potentially endless vistas. The resulting psychological containment of the vast, unfamiliar, and often threatening geography of North America afforded a means of feeling at home in landscapes that were frequently deficient in the reassuring amenities of old-world civilization.

The definitive statements of the Picturesque in North America were publications written by the American journalist Nathaniel Parker Willis and illustrated by the prolific British artist William Henry Bartlett. *American Scenery; or, Land, Lake and River: Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* and *Canadian Scenery Illustrated* were originally issued as series, in inexpensive chapters or "parts" that were subsequently published as bound volumes in 1840 and 1842, respectively [5–6]. Their glory lies in the illustrations. Bartlett had made on-the-spot sketches and watercolours beginning in 1836, first in the United States and then in Canada [7–8], and these were ultimately translated into steel engravings by two dozen artists. The approximately one hundred engravings

included in each of *American Scenery* and *Canadian Scenery* combine topographical accuracy with the same touchstones of the Picturesque that Bartlett employed with equal consistency in the many illustrations he made for books about England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, the Danube River, the Rhine, and Egypt and the Near East.

American Scenery and *Canadian Scenery* were frequently reprinted; but Bartlett's vision achieved an even wider distribution because North American companies were able to plunder his work without fear of copyright infringement. Selections from his illustrations for *Canadian Scenery* later appeared in, for example, the country's pre-eminent nineteenth-century illustrated newspaper, the *Canadian Illustrated News* (1869–83), and in its French-language counterpart, *L'Opinion publique* (1870–83). This was done at a time when technological expansion, urban growth, and social modernization of all types had drawn a clear line between contemporary life and the apparently simpler North America depicted by Bartlett. Nor was the visual legacy of Bartlett's North American work limited to books, magazines, and the sale of individual prints. In the United States, his images appeared on wallpaper, inexpensive pottery, and luxury porcelain dinnerware. His Canadian scenes decorated the surfaces of jugs, plates, and serving dishes, as seen in a vegetable dish and lid manufactured by Francis Morley & Co., one among many examples of Bartlett tableware produced by the Staffordshire firm. In this piece, two *Canadian Scenery* images – *The Chaudière Bridge near Quebec* and *Indian Scene* – were subtly adjusted to suit the shapes of dish and lid [9].

Aside from their high standards of production, *American Scenery* and *Canadian Scenery* achieved popularity because they reinforced the growing allure of “picturesque travel”: tours to natural beauty spots that conformed to expectations about picturesque aesthetics. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, such travel in North America was enjoyed by those who had been seduced by William Gilpin's *An Essay on Picturesque Travel*, which was available in book form as well as being reprinted in 1793 in the *New York Magazine or Literary Repository*. Gilpin recommended that travellers pay particular attention to contrasts in light and dark, high and low, rocky and wooded, and cultivated and wild. In Britain, this approach to travel quickly became so much in vogue that it was parodied in William Combe's book *The First Tour of Doctor Syntax; In Search of the Picturesque* (the first of several editions appeared in 1812), which owed much of its huge transatlantic status to Thomas Rowlandson's illustrations [10]. In North America, picturesque travel was originally undertaken mainly by wealthy urbanites in and around the Hudson River Valley, but it soon became popular with the fast-growing middle classes. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 connected the Hudson River to the Great Lakes and offered an important route west for fashionable travellers. By the 1840s, so-called summer books recorded in enthusiastic and sentimental prose their authors' experiences with picturesque travel. This thriving literary genre was lampooned in a humorous 1872 essay in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* that chronicled the disillusioning experiences of two young women and their grandfather. Embarking on a trip to escape the noisy, dirty city, they rapidly discover that the countryside is filled with grimy roads leading to coal mines, and is populated by farmers and small-town dwellers obsessed with aping the latest big-city fashions [11].

As its name suggests, a picturesque landscape was one that could be appreciated as if it were a picture, and one reason why picturesque travel became a major industry was that it offered a means for the ambitious tourist to become visually sophisticated by learning to view nature as a work of art. In a similar vein, the increasingly literate population strove to improve their minds and cultivate their sensibilities by devouring an array of texts, many of them dedicated to extolling the picturesque potential of North American scenery. Reproductions of Hudson River School landscapes were made available in *The Home Book of the Picturesque: American Scenery, Art, and Literature* (1852) [12], *Art in America: A Critical and Historical Sketch* (1880), and other such books. The expectation that the citizens of the continent's new, democratic countries should engage in self-improvement at every opportunity was also supported by the explosion of cheap periodical literature. From about mid-century, these inexpensive publications turned to wood engraving, a technique that allowed the printing of

text and illustrations on the same press at the same time. Although North American landscape was not heavily featured in these large-circulation magazines (their emphasis was on current events and personalities, exotic lands, and edifying fiction), it did appear on occasion, as examples in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and similar reviews make clear [13].

Among the more self-consciously artistic journals, *The Aldine*, published in the United States in the 1870s and '80s, was lavishly illustrated with large-format, high-quality wood engravings often based on paintings, many of them landscapes [14]. *The Aldine's* 1871 announcement that it would be producing a series of deluxe views of American natural scenery encouraged a rival firm, New York's D. Appleton and Company, to scrap plans to publish a comparable series in its own magazine (*Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science, and Art*), and instead to issue the illustrations as forty-eight individual "parts." This competition to attract the many Americans who were interested in the landscapes of their post-Civil War country resulted in the most important manifestation of the American Picturesque to appear during the second half of the century. *Picturesque America; or, The Land We Live In* was edited by William Cullen Bryant and, after being sold as a subscription series from 1872 to 1874, was published as a two-volume set. Easily affordable on the subscription plan and generously illustrated with some thousand engravings, its coverage of virtually the entire continental United States was given pride of place in countless homes across the nation [15]. So successful was *Picturesque America* that a decade later it led to the somewhat more modest but highly attractive *Picturesque Canada: The Country as It Was and Is*, edited by the principal of Queen's College (Kingston), George Monro Grant.

Like *Picturesque America* before it, *Picturesque Canada* was much praised by critics and general readers alike, exploiting contemporary design practices to make the presentation of its illustrations as appealing as possible. Images overlap in visually striking fashion [16], or burst their borders so that text and image engage in dynamic interaction. Interestingly, both publications employed the umbrella term "picturesque" to embrace a range of subjects that went beyond the rural and recreational to include urban scenes, and even industrial subjects that ranged from railroads to the occasional factory. In so doing they provided modern-day visual summaries of the variety and breadth of their respective countries, all aspects of which became incorporated into the notion of picturesqueness. When Bartlett supplemented his depictions of landscapes in *American Scenery* and *Canadian Scenery* with intermittent views of towns, mills, and other buildings, he consistently lodged them in compositions that adhered to the tenets of picturesque pictorial organization. Four decades later, *Picturesque America* and *Picturesque Canada* not only incorporated a significantly larger representation of such subjects, but also strayed in several instances from the compositional conventions to which Bartlett had been so faithful. In these later publications, "picturesque" was casually stretched to mean "impressive," "dramatic," and, improbably, even "sublime."

This expanded definition soon became standard in other publications. An essay on "Picturesque New York" in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* in 1892 included views of such urban landscapes as Madison Square, The Battery, The Tombs (the New York Halls of Justice and House of Detention), and an elevated railroad station – none of them bearing much relationship to the rules of picturesque aesthetics [17]. The plausibly titled *Picturesque Lunenburg* (1899) was followed in the early years of the new century by *Picturesque Winnipeg* and *Picturesque Views of Busy Regina* [18–19]. Finally, twentieth-century decks of "Picturesque Canada" playing cards, sold by the Canadian Pacific Railway, showed landscapes, architecture, and transportation from across the nation, promoting cross-country travel by featuring a different photograph on each card [20]. The buildings, however, were often seen in isolation from their surroundings, and thus functioned as individual landmarks for their own sake rather than as components of a larger picturesque vision. The North American Picturesque had expanded beyond anything that William Henry Bartlett – let alone William Gilpin – would have recognized.

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George Heriot, *Ruins of Chateau Richer*, 1807 [4]

Checklist

- 1 William Gilpin. *An Essay upon Prints...* 2nd ed. London: Printed by G. Scott, for J. Robson, bookseller to the Princess Dowager of Wales, 1768.
- 2 Carl Paul Barbier. *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque*. London: The Clarendon Press, 1963.
- 3 *View of the Rock Bridge*. In Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. London: John Stockdale, 1799.
- 4 George Heriot (engraved by F. C. Lewis). *Ruins of Chateau Richer, with Cape Tourment*. In George Heriot, *Travels through the Canadas...* London: Richard Phillips, 1807.
- 5 William Henry Bartlett (engraved by R. Wallis). *Village of Sing-Sing (Hudson River)*. In Nathaniel Parker Willis, *American Scenery; or, Land, Lake and River: Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature*, no. 2. London: George Virtue, 1840.
- 6 William Henry Bartlett (engraved by E. Benjamin). *Mill on the Rideau River, near Bytown*. In Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Canadian Scenery Illustrated*, vol. 2. London: George Virtue, 1842.
- 7 William Henry Bartlett. *Wolf's Cove, Quebec*, c. 1840. Preparatory drawing for *Canadian Scenery Illustrated*. National Gallery of Canada.
- 8 William Henry Bartlett. *A Lake Farm on the Frontier*, c. 1840. Preparatory drawing for *Canadian Scenery Illustrated*. National Gallery of Canada.
- 9 Francis Morley & Co., England. Vegetable dish and cover, c. 1850–58. Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- 10 Thomas Rowlandson. *Doctor Syntax Sketching the Lake*. In William Combe, *The First Tour of Doctor Syntax; In Search of the Picturesque*. London: Nattali and Bond, [185–].
- 11 [Constance Fenimore Woolson]. *How Pure Is This Atmosphere!* In “In Search of the Picturesque,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 44, no. 266 (July 1872). Private collection.
- 12 John Frederick Kensett (engraved by H. Beckwith). *Catskill Mountain Scenery*. In *The Home Book of the Picturesque: American Scenery, Art, and Literature*. New York: G. P. Putnam, 1852. Private collection.
- 13 “Scenery on the Erie Railroad,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 2 (July 1850): 213–15. Library and Archives Canada.
- 14 J. Douglas Woodward (engraved by T. S. Boger). *Mount Ascutney, Connecticut Valley*. In *The Aldine: The Art Journal of America* 7, no. 19 (July 1875). Library and Archives Canada.
- 15 J. Douglas Woodward. *View from Steeple of Arlington-Street Church* [Boston]. In William Cullen Bryant, ed., *Picturesque America; or, The Land We Live In: A delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, waterfalls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities and other picturesque features of our country*, vol. 2. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874.
- 16 F. B. Schell and T. Hogan (engraved by T. L. Smart). *Muskoka Scenery*. In George Monro Grant, ed., *Picturesque Canada: The Country as It Was and Is*, no. 25. Toronto: Belden Bros. [1883].
- 17 M. G. Van Rensselaer. “Picturesque New York,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 45, no. 2 (December 1892). Private collection.
- 18 *Picturesque Lunenburg*. Lunenburg: W. A. Letson, 1899.
- 19 *Picturesque Views of Busy Regina, Sask.* Winnipeg: Bloom Bros. [c. 1915].
- 20 Canadian Pacific Railway. “Picturesque Canada” Souvenir Playing Cards, n.d. Private collection.

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Cover: F. B. Schell and T. Hogan, *Muskoka Scenery*, 1883 [16]