



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2014

Aesthetics of Theory in the Modern Era and Beyond /
Photographie documentaire

David Schuyler, *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909*

Hélène Valance



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7230>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.7230

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Hélène Valance, "David Schuyler, *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2014, Online since 04 March 2015, connection on 15 June 2021.
URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7230> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.7230>

This text was automatically generated on 15 June 2021.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mise à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

David Schuyler, *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909*

Hélène Valance

REFERENCES

SCHUYLER, David, *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012, 240 p., 978-0-8014-500-8, 26.50 €/30 \$

- 1 David Schuyler's *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909* is an interdisciplinary study of the Hudson River valley's construction as a cultural object throughout the XIXth century. It weaves together considerations on painting, literature, landscape gardening, ecological and historical preservation, economic and industrial development in a rich narrative that illuminates the complex and evolving meanings of the river from its first touristic exploitation in the 1820s to the ambitious Hudson-Fulton celebrations of 1909. The author has written numerous books on the transformations of American landscape and its theorizations in the XIXth century,¹ with an emphasis on local history² and on important figures of American landscape architecture.³ *Sanctified Landscape's* seven chapters fall into two main parts: the first four chapters are devoted to the construction of the Hudson River valley as a landscape of particular importance for American culture, while the last three examine the limitations of this "sanctified landscape" as both the environment of the Hudson River valley and its perception evolve in the last decades of the XIXth century and the early years of the XXth century.
- 2 The first chapter, entitled "The tourists' River: Experiencing the Hudson Valley" takes the reader on a journey along the river, detailing its most prominent sites and showing how they were made to be construed as significant places for the new stream of tourists

that started exploring the region in the 1820s. Schuyler shows how the Hudson was promoted as one of the most important sites in the commemoration of the revolutionary era, as well as a natural landscape with remarkable features. Citing tourist guides from the period, Schuyler's narrative stops at landmarks such as Anthony's Nose, West Point, Fort Putnam, or the Catskill Mountain House, giving the reader a vivid perception of the landscape. In this chapter, he introduces Cole and Irving as tourists, anticipating the following chapters and making apparent the intimate connection between the book's multiple approaches. This introductory chapter ends on a note that also foreshadows the later developments of Schuyler's argument, with the consideration of commentators' ambivalence towards the technological and industrial transformations that at once allowed the rise of tourism in the area, and contributed to defacing the landscape.

- 3 Schuyler then moves to a closer analysis of the works of painter Thomas Cole, arguing that if Cole was instrumental in shaping the image of the national landscape, it was mainly because he made the Hudson River valley a significant landscape for the whole country. Schuyler notes that Cole was among the first artists to benefit from the development of the commercial activities along the valley, as the construction the Erie canal created a class of wealthy patrons for his art. Yet it is the same development Cole later lamented, manipulating his representations of the valley in an effort to restore nature's wilderness when industries and cities began to encroach on the landscape.
- 4 Another important figure in the elaboration of the Hudson River valley as a nationally significant place was Washington Irving, whom Schuyler studies along with his follower Nathaniel Parker Willis. For Schuyler, Irving "anthropomorphized the river, gave it a soul and other human qualities" and, even if they were based on an imitation of German folklore, the *Knickerbocker* stories "shaped much of the folklore and history of the region" (48). Schuyler focuses on the way Irving's own presence on the banks of the Hudson contributed to alter the landscape. Irving made his cottage Sunnyside in Tarrytown the site of discovery of the alleged manuscript by Dietrich Knickerbrocker, thus attracting attention to the house. Sunnyside's fantastic gables and weathervanes and picturesque collection of farm animals made it a sight of "sweet scene of rural simplicity" to visitors (54), "that took iconic importance as the physical extension of the man and the region". Indeed, in Schuyler's view, Irving "invented himself as the quintessential New Yorker" (56), and became "in some respects the human embodiment of the Hudson River valley during his lifetime". Nathaniel Parker Willis, following in the footsteps of Irving, wrote numerous texts on the valley in William H. Bartlett's celebrated *American Scenery*. Like Irving, Willis conceived of himself as an author rooted in the valley's landscape where he built his own house, Idlewild, with the help of Central Park co-designer Calvert Vaux.
- 5 Schuyler's attention to the homes of prominent Hudson River personalities comes to focus in chapter four, which examines the work of landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing. A sometimes overlooked predecessor to Frederic Law Olmsted, Downing adapted European ideas on the landscape to the specificities of the North American continent.⁴ He was the first, for instance, to build a house and gardens in the gothic revival style, a move that "marked a new direction in American taste" (77). In this chapter, Schuyler shows how Downing's efforts to shape the local landscape directly affected tourism, as the estates of wealthy residents became one of the main attractions

for visitors, and how his *Cottage Residences*, the first house pattern book in the United States, served in the domestication of the Hudson River valley.

- 6 Schuyler's fifth chapter, entitled "Change and the Search for Continuity at Midcentury" marks a turn in the history of the Hudson River valley's history, as the first generation of men who established its cultural significance began to disappear. This chapter examines the impact of the increased development of transportation (trains and steamboats) and the subsequent growth of industrial and commercial activities, as well as that of immigration and urbanization. Schuyler considers and compares the evolution of small communities along the river, such as Newburgh, Kingston, or Roundout, showing also that the countryside, and especially farming activities, were as much affected by these transformations as the towns and cities of the region. The 1850s were also a transitional decade in that they saw the disappearance of most of the valley's historical figures with the death of the last heroes of the revolution. The Hudson River valley gradually became an object of the past, celebrated by Benson John Lossing in his historical account of the revolution. Schuyler devotes the second half of this chapter to the efforts of residents to preserve local historical sites such as Washington's Headquarters at Newburgh, which became "a symbol, a shrine to American republicanism," and the first building in the United States to be preserved for its historical significance. Yet, as the very structure of the chapter suggests, this desire to preserve was intimately linked to the transformations that affected the landscape, and appeared as a symptom of the decline of the Hudson River valley.
- 7 This impression dominates the following chapter, devoted to the career of Jervis McEntee, whom one could describe as the last representative of the Hudson River School of painting. In a way, McEntee's work functions as the pendant of Cole's: while Cole's paintings revealed to his contemporaries the collective value of Hudson River valley and established it as an iconic landscape, McEntee's production tried to perpetuate it against new models, and met with limited success in doing so. His retrospective, nostalgic autumnal scenes, though they defined a highly personal style, were much less popular than the more spectacular views created by his colleagues Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt or Thomas Moran, which depicted more exotic landscapes in the far West, Alaska, and South America, and ultimately failed to assert itself in an art market increasingly opened to international competition.
- 8 "The Naturalist's River" turns to the life and work of John Burroughs. Burroughs, today a relatively forgotten writer, published wide-audience essays on nature inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. His engaging prose and very personal style won him popular acclaim during his lifetime – Theodore Roosevelt once offered his books to poor children in Hells Kitchen. Yet his reputation was eclipsed by other figures such as that of John Muir, whose writings on nature had a definitely more environmentalist dimension. While the river itself was becoming the prey of dramatic pollution, Burroughs failed to address the issue of conservation, and remained, in Schuyler's words, more a naturalist than an environmentalist (150).
- 9 The final chapter of the book addresses these ecological preoccupations, detailing how a small group of elite citizens of the region formed the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society and strove to protect natural sites such as Stony Point or the Palisades. The pages on the Palisades show the shifting value of the Hudson River valley in the public mind at a time private interests were pitted against the public good. The Palisades were dedicated during the Hudson-Fulton celebration, which is the last

example of a collective interest in the Hudson River valley the book analyzes. Meant as a compensation for New York city's failure to secure the universal exposition of 1893, the celebration was much like a world's fair in that it affirmed its ostensibly educational ambitions, emphasized New York's role in the nation's history, promoted the assimilation of new immigrants through a collective pageant, and showcased the American culture to foreigners and its discourse of local and national pride. Yet the celebrations proved to be a commercial failure, and public attendance remained disappointing. In Schuyler's eyes, the limited success of the celebration lay in the fact that it looked too much to the past and not enough to the future, failing to grasp the new problems that presented themselves to the region at the dawn of the xxth century.

- 10 *Sanctified Landscape* is a wonderfully well-researched account of the Hudson River valley's history and of its cultural interpretations throughout the xixth century. It succeeds in establishing a coherent narrative of the way the region was turned into a particularly significant landscape in the nation's history, without nonetheless overlooking the complexities or limitations of the process. One of its main qualities resides in the way it brings together varied sources and figures in a complex interdisciplinary study. Schuyler makes extensive use of primary as well as of secondary sources, providing a very synthetic account of the available literature on the Hudson River valley. Yet at times the profusion of quotes seems to eclipse the author's argument. One sometimes feels the primary sources cited could be less numerous, and give way to longer analyses on behalf of the author. Similarly, if Schuyler is a very attentive reader of other scholars, his book sometimes seems to relay their accounts more than asserting its own argument. Despite these limitations, *Sanctified Landscape* remains a very good contribution to the study of landscape representation in the United States, and of the complex ways place, local identity and national narratives intermingle.

NOTES

1. David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
2. David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940-1980*, University Park, Penn State University Press, 2002.
3. David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-1852*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Schuyler was also co-editor of *The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers* (Johns Hopkins University Press).
4. Andrew Jackson Downing, *Treatise on the theory and Practice of Landscape gardening*, Adapted to North America, 1841.

AUTHORS

HÉLÈNE VALANCE

The Courtauld Institute of Art