

Arne Neset, Arcadian Waters and Wanton Seas: The Iconology of Waterscapes in Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Culture, New York, Peter Lang, 2009

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- ¹ In *Arcadian Waters and Wanton Seas*, Norwegian Americanist Arne Neset provides a clearly written and well-documented study of landscape paintings featuring rivers, lakes, or the sea—what he broadly refers to as “waterscapes”—in nineteenth-century America. Or, rather, in nineteenth-century “Transatlantic culture,” since he argues vigorously against any attempt at restricting American landscape paintings to a national, not to mention nationalistic, perspective. Indeed, the main thread of his book is to situate art produced in the United States in broader art historical contexts, both past and contemporary, so as to show how “American” art was actually first and foremost art, and that it should not be circumscribed within strict national limits. Neset is decidedly eager to disconnect American art from the nationalist pieties it is still often shrouded in, and his book is more broadly an effort to reinstate art history after years of domination by cultural studies, with their focus on sociocultural rather than art historical contexts. One reason for this approach is that Neset is keenly attuned to our skeptical age, in which any notions of art’s relation to democracy, for instance, have often been questioned. He rejects any notion of the “uniqueness” of American art, and he shrewdly remarks that “it is often forgotten that the idea of American uniqueness was first conceived by Europeans. In their attempts to understand, interpret, and sell their discovery of the Western Hemisphere, they were the first to adopt the concept of American exceptionalism” (13). Neset provides an informed overview of the scholarly study of American art, which constitutes a long introduction to what is the core of his book, a specific study of waterscapes—respectively

views of rivers, lakes and ponds (including rowing and hunting scenes), and seascapes of various sorts.

- 2 Neset underlines the paradoxical nature of nineteenth-century American art, which has long been caught between two contradictory claims, that it was American according to Americans, and that it was un-American, i.e. mostly derivative of European models, according to Europeans: it is thus caught between overvaluation and undervaluation. Neset's efforts are oriented toward a more dispassionate, but loving, consideration of what was painted in America in the nineteenth century, thus joining the scholarship which "during the last five to ten years [...] has toned down the idea of exceptionalism and a unique American vision in nineteenth-century American art" (18). Neset questions the long standard American conception of "Americanness" as being "impervious to foreign influence" (13), rather than in a more intercultural relation to European and other nations. Clearly situating himself in a Transatlantic perspective, he emphasizes for instance the importance of Dutch art or of the Düsseldorf School for American painters. But he goes beyond conventional influence studies in his advocacy of what he calls "a transatlantic iconology" (20), which is motivated by a belief in the central importance of "a common memory of landscape that has been handed down from antiquity" (21). Demonstrating a real delight in cultural history as well as a true pedagogical instinct throughout his book, Arne Neset painstakingly retraces the history and cultural significance of a number of literary, artistic, and philosophical motifs and concerns (*paysages moralisés* or hunting, for instance), before he considers the various ways in which American artists provided variations on these themes—variations that often echo artistic developments elsewhere. Even as he ranges across a wide cross-section of Western art with ease, one of the more interesting aspects of his book is to provide insight into Scandinavian artworks—by such artists as Johan Christian Dahl, Adolph Tidemand or Hans Gude—that closely parallel or shed light on American counterparts.
- 3 The most potent idea in Neset's book is a determined and meticulous desire to remove American art from a search for Americanness, and a concomitant focus on what he describes as the "universal" taste for certain categories of landscapes. For instance, although Neset resorts to the word "Luminism" many times, in spite of its dismissal by many art historians, to refer to a set of formal characteristics, he clearly rejects the attempts to define it as specifically American, and especially Transcendentalist (174-75). Neset's focus on what he regards as nearly "universal" tastes and approaches to landscape will no doubt irritate more skeptical readers, especially those of a postmodern bent. But by referring to "the universal popularity of the lake- or pond-in- the-landscape picture," Neset is first and foremost eager to situate American art at a distance from exceptionalist claims. One of Neset's most central notions is that of "Arcadia," which he regards as "a state of mind and therefore eternal and capable of endless adaptations" (118), and he accordingly refers a wide variety of the themes and works he addresses to Arcadia and variations on the Arcadian theme of death ("Et in Arcadia ego").
- 4 Such a sweeping survey may have its downsides. The reader may thus sometimes sense that Neset multiplies names and references and only touches upon important notions. For instance, one would have liked to have more extensive developments on a notion such as that of "central consciousness," as evoked on p. 100 and again on p. 103, which he only credits to Henry James but whose connection to his understanding of American waterscapes he does not fully address. One may also feel that, as a consequence of his belief in the universality of a number of themes, Neset's book tends to downplay

difference and variation through time, and especially that he leaves the question of what specifically defines the nineteenth century somewhat unexplored. However, there are a number of interesting connections between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century works, and an epilogue also specifically considers twentieth-century developments in waterscapes.

- 5 Arne Neset is clearly writing about a subject he loves, and his book is quite useful as a sifting-through of centuries of Western cultural history and a refreshing tribute to the vitality of art produced in North America.
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