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The Art of Tropical Travel, 1768-1830

Luciana Martins

Draft of a chapter published in 'The Art of Tropical Travel, 1768-1830', in M. Ogborn and C. Withers (eds.) *Georgian Geographies* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 72-91.

'What a place for an artist! I do most fervently hope that I may once more visit it, and have more time to revel in such delicious scenes... I shall not attempt a description of the place here; I am indeed but ill qualified to describe any thing but the scenery, and I am certainly better able to do with the pencil than the pen'. So wrote the artist Conrad Martens on his arrival in the bay of Rio de Janeiro on 5 July 1833.¹ Well aware of the picturesque qualities of the Brazilian harbour ('a rare place as I am told, for sketching'), Martens had little time to appreciate the scenery.² Having learned news from the Beagle that Captain Fitzroy had unexpectedly dispensed with the services of the artist originally appointed to the expedition, he immediately set off for Montevideo to offer his services. But his short stay in Rio provided material for works finished during his subsequent Australian career.

The picturesque appropriation of Rio de Janeiro by European voyagers formed part of an imaginative geography of tropical travel whose outlines are registered in a large and heterogeneous archive of sketches, paintings, charts, maps, diaries and letters.³ A common feature of these images was the view of harbours such as Rio from the sea; a long-anticipated vision of a secure haven for travellers across the ocean, though at a comfortably safe distance from the hectic life of the city. Significantly, however, British artists produced relatively few major finished works depicting the Rio landscape, certainly in comparison with the output of their French, German, Austrian and North

American counterparts.⁴ The visual representation of the bay and surrounding topography was left for much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the hands of maritime surveyors: midshipmen, officers, chart-makers, hydrographers.⁵ Although beyond the formal reach of the British empire, Rio de Janeiro was a much-frequented port of call for Royal Navy ships bound for Australia, the Indian Ocean and the Far East; in 1808 it became the headquarters of the Admiralty's South American station.

The relative paucity of the Brazilian landscapes produced by British professional artists prompts broader questions about the cultures of landscape art and the place of tropical travel in Georgian culture. In addressing such questions, we need to attend to the multiple ways in which landscapes may be rendered and made available (or not) to wider publics. In fact, with few exceptions, the majority of Brazilian landscapes produced by travelling British artists remained in their sketchbooks, unfinished and largely unseen. While it is possible to trace the historical geography of taste in terms of changing artistic preferences for particular places as subjects appropriate for landscape painting,⁶ it is important to note that the work of professional painters depended not merely on their own preferences but also on those of their audiences. Their works were meant to be framed, for exhibition on the walls of picture galleries or display within private houses in Britain and elsewhere.⁷ The production of painted landscapes was thus a complex process in which philosophical debates, academic theories and art criticism were combined with wider processes of cultural consumption.⁸

Art historians have conventionally identified a broad shift in the Georgian period from the classical ideal of landscape to a new model of picturesque taste, a model which was itself increasingly challenged by a tendency to naturalistic landscape painting.⁹ The latter tendency is frequently said to have favoured the practice of open-air sketching, a

development which ought in principle to have privileged the travelling artist, who had until then occupied a liminal position in the hierarchy of conventional taste. In contrast to the academic painter who regarded nature as the means by which he could display his art and afford amusement, the travelling artist in the era of naturalism was said (in the words of the naturalist William Burchell, himself an accomplished draughtsman) to consider art as a ‘means of exhibiting nature, and of conveying information’.¹⁰ Given such claims, one might expect to see, from the late eighteenth century and especially after the end of the Napoleonic wars, the appearance of an increasing number of finished paintings of landscape scenery around the globe. Yet, with the notable exception of Italian scenery, the ‘nature’ depicted in British landscape art of the early nineteenth century was represented principally by landscapes of the mother-country which, as Stephen Daniels and others have shown, helped to construct a powerful visual identity for the nation.¹¹ The relative rarity of tropical landscapes may to some extent be accounted for (until 1815) by the restrictions on travel which accompanied the French revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Yet this context is insufficient to explain the formation of a particular taste for domestic landscape. Furthermore, even when overseas landscapes were admired on aesthetic grounds, their qualities were attributed less to their intrinsic content than to the opportunity they afforded for British imaginative genius to show its talent, as in the case of Turner’s Swiss views exhibited to much acclaim in 1819.¹²

In recent years, the visual arts have proved fertile ground for critical studies of relationships between culture, travel and empire.¹³ Yet the traveller’s gaze has in this work perhaps too easily been associated with the figure of the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’, and the experience of novelty too readily reduced to repetition. The ‘imperial eyes’ of the European observer do not simply ‘passively look out and possess’, a

formulation which leaves little room for the unexpected, for surprises and disappointments which demand an active reconfiguration of travellers' intentions and preconceptions.¹⁴ The depiction of the colours, scale, atmosphere and light of the tropics in the work of travelling artists, for example, required a series of difficult negotiations between European aesthetic conventions and the experience of traversing the field, especially under tropical skies. Merely being in the tropics was sometimes said by European travellers to induce a sense of unease - affecting not only the eyes, but the whole of the body.¹⁵ To the extent that it was translated into the finished products of artists, this unease was not well calculated to meet with the approval of the metropolitan artistic community. Moreover, it was common for travellers to complain of the difficulty of giving any visual form to what was experienced 'on the spot'.¹⁶ Seeing and knowing the tropics was far from an easy matter. As Leonard Bell has argued in his study of the work of the travelling artist Augustus Earle, 'rather than being unproblematic constituents of projects of domination' such images may often be 'pluralistic in their meanings and modes of operation'.¹⁷

This chapter focusses specifically on the art of tropical travel, set within the context of a broader visual archive of voyaging during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I begin with an account of the relationship between open-air painting and the representation of nature in British landscape art during this period, before moving on to consider the shifting relations between science and art in Georgian Britain, particularly in relation to practices of observation in the field and visualization more generally. There follows a case study of the tropical landscapes of William Havell, a professional artist who travelled in both Brazil and India in the years after 1815. At the end of the chapter, I return briefly to the more general issue of the relationship between the uneasiness of tropical landscapes and British landscape art in order to qualify the notion

of absence with which I began. While tropical subjects were rarely to be found in British art galleries, the work of travelling artists could provide a pictorial identity for colonial élites across the empire.

Open-air painting and the study of nature

How to reconcile art and nature in a unified aesthetic system was a major challenge for British landscape painters in the Georgian period. Although not a novelty in itself, having been a recurrent challenge in Western art since the ancient Greeks, the issue generated heated debate at this time because a new conception of ‘nature’ was in the making. Both the classical ideal of Italianate landscapes and the more modern aesthetic of the picturesque were increasingly being modified or undermined by a novel approach to landscape art, in which nature ‘unvarnished’ provided the inspiration. For artists like Cornelius Varley, the picturesque aesthetic was as selective and artificial as the classical: ‘less a new look at nature than a new idea of what could make a picture’.¹⁸ Even though it had played a pivotal role in the development of landscape aesthetics, the picturesque was to be transformed or even abandoned by a new generation of artists wedded to a new ethos of naturalism.

Linked with this critical attitude to earlier pictorial conventions was a radical commitment to improvisation and experiment sur le motif. This in some respects reflected the increasing influence of new methods and approaches in natural philosophy and, in particular, the burgeoning ‘iconographic inventory of the world’ provided by the voyages of navigators such as Cook and Bougainville.¹⁹ By itself, of course, empirical observation in the field could not guarantee the production of a work of art.²⁰ Indeed,

throughout the Georgian period, the spontaneity of outdoor sketching continued to be sufficient to disqualify its immediate products from being considered as elevated works of art. The direct study of nature was still on the margins of artistic activity; it was merely part of the artist's training, the results of which were conceived as raw materials, available merely to the painters themselves, their friends, and perhaps students.²¹ As Charlotte Klonk suggests, the phrase 'sketch from nature' present in many of the titles of pictures displayed at the Royal Academy from the 1790s implied merely they were derived from observations (particularly sketches) in the field, rather than necessarily being painted on the spot.²²

As Philip Conisbee has shown, the practice of open-air painting itself can be traced back to pictures of seventeenth-century Rome.²³ Beginning with an account of Claude Lorrain's experiments during the early 1630s, Conisbee traces the possible evidence for the continuation of this practice in some of Velázquez's Villa Medici paintings, sketches by Salvator Rosa, Gaspar Dughet and Alexander-François Desportes, and subsequently in the practice of Claude-Joseph Vernet and Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. Such techniques of open-air painting eventually filtered into the work of English landscape artists. Alexander Cozens, for example, was one of the earliest British artists to study in Rome. During his stay in Italy in 1746, when he worked in the studio of Vernet, Cozens noted in his sketchbook that he had been sketching from nature both in watercolours and oils. Back in England, however, he worked almost exclusively in monochrome washes. From 1750 to 1754 Cozens occupied the position of Drawing Master at the Royal School of Mathematics, Christ's Hospital, where he was involved in the training of naval surveyors. Marine views and coastal profiles were prominent in his own work, and it is possible to discern a correspondence between Cozens' role as a teacher of the art of drawing coastal profiles and his elaboration of a

perceptive theory of landscape forms. Cozens' theory of landscape was based on recognition of forms through individualization and instant interpretation of their essential characters, precisely the visual skills that were also demanded in the art of navigation.²⁴ Significantly, Anne Lyles attributes Cozens' preference for working in monochrome to his developing interest in landscape theory, especially his idea of composing imaginary landscapes using ink blots.²⁵ Gradually, Cozens' emphasis on tone and mass in his drawing led him away from open-air painting, as he became more and more concerned with the representation of idealised rather than actual landscapes. His methods, however, exerted an important influence on the following generation of British landscape painters, especially his son, John Robert Cozens, as well as John Constable. It was left to these artists to narrow the gap between the imaginary landscape and the topographical view.

Another British artist who came under Vernet's influence was Richard Wilson. Although there is no direct evidence that Wilson painted in oils out-of-doors (his preferred medium was drawing), one of his Italian paintings shows an artist seated on a folded stool at work on a portable easel, perhaps implying an endorsement of the practice.²⁶ Wilson also taught open-air painting techniques to his pupils, Thomas Jones and William Hodges. The work of Hodges, as Bernard Smith suggests, was pioneering in the sense that he made the first tentative efforts in British art to fuse the qualities of open-air oil sketch with that of his finished work.²⁷ Smith emphasises, however, that 'what we have in Hodges is not the beginnings of a tradition but an important anticipation of naturalistic landscape painting'.²⁸ Hodges accompanied James Cook on his second voyage to the South Pacific from 1772 to 1775, and, five years later, made a four-year-tour in India. It is in his landscapes of the South Pacific that significant innovations in painterly practice may be discerned. Some of Hodges' paintings during

this voyage have the freshness and directness of a work composed in the light of the day, and they suggest a considerable shift in his technique since his days as a pupil of Richard Wilson. Significantly, it is clear that Hodges was under pressure to produce works which would satisfy the demands of quite different of overlapping metropolitan communities of curiosi, virtuosi and savants.²⁹ Indeed, when he exhibited his Pacific landscapes at the Royal Academy in 1777, they met with some scepticism: as one critic put it, ‘his pictures all appear as if they were unfinished, and as if the colours were laid on the canvas with a skewer.’³⁰

Although it was widely practised by oil painters and watercolour draughtsmen, the presentation of accurate information in the form of topographical views was regarded as a lowly specialism for much of the eighteenth century. Henry Fuseli, Professor at the Royal Academy Schools, once described topography as mere ‘map-work’, contrasting with the higher ideals of expressed in landscapes by such masters as Poussin and Lorrain.³¹ In his influential Discourses on art delivered to the Royal Academy between 1769 and 1790, Joshua Reynolds similarly urged artists to rise above the ‘particular’ in order to produce a ‘general’ representation of the natural world through a process of idealisation. The academic debate over the status of landscape art which arose in the era of Hodges and Varley, implicated not only questions of composition or subject-matter, but also assumptions about the relative merits of particular media and techniques, such as the use of colour or monochrome, outlines or shades, watercolour or oil. As Anne Lyles explains:

in theories about art, colour had often been associated with verisimilitude and lifelike imitation. In particular, there had been a long-running debate, originating in Italy in the sixteenth century, about the relative merits of drawing and design

(disegno) on the one hand, and colour (colore) on the other. According to this debate, disegno was associated with invention, with the concept or idea originating in the artist's mind, whereas colore was equated with nature and the real world, its diversity, variety and above all its particularity.³²

Colore therefore signified more than simply colouring; it implied a particular artistic skill which required accurate observation, dexterity and precision in delineating the contours of nature. Such practices linked the 'art of colouring' to the empirical, experimental sciences. On the other hand, disegno demanded an intellectual, theoretical way of seeing the world; an approach closer to the Platonic idealism and intellectual speculation of the abstract sciences. Charlotte Klonk has argued that, in the period between 1790 and 1830, changes in the scientific conception of nature increasingly led artists to 'abandon conventional pictorial formulae, such as the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful, in favour of a more "naturalistic" representation, giving priority to detailed observation of particular cases.'³³ It is important to note, however, that in continuing to privilege the use of colour and shade, this new generation of landscape painters still owed much to classical pictorial conventions. This apparent contradiction sheds some light on the dilemma faced by these artists: on the one hand, inspired by a philosophical curiosity consistent with the spirit of the Enlightenment, they aimed to reproduce nature as it was presented to their eyes; on the other hand, their audiences did not consider the results of their experiments to be works of art in themselves.³⁴ It is to this 'scientific' way of seeing nature that we now turn.

The arts of seeing and knowing

‘Seeing is an art which must be learnt’: thus wrote William Herschel, the natural philosopher who designed many of the telescopes used in eighteenth-century maritime expeditions.³⁵ Following in his father’s footsteps, the astronomer John Herschel mapped the stars of the Southern hemisphere, incidentally becoming one of the pioneers in the development of the modern techniques of photography.³⁶ As Jonathan Crary suggests, a tangible shift in the ‘techniques of the observer’ and indeed in the epistemological conditions of observation can be identified in the opening decades of the nineteenth century:

Vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a science of vision will tend to mean increasingly an interrogation of the physiological makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light and optical transmission. It is a moment when the visible escapes from the timeless order of the camera obscura and become lodged in another apparatus, within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body.³⁷

Central to this shift, argues Crary, ‘was the discovery that knowledge was conditioned by the physical and anatomical functioning of the body, and perhaps most importantly, of the eyes.’³⁸ Such a development is especially significant in the present context because it implies a new attitude towards the repertoire of visual practices available to the observer and hence the legitimacy of scientific observation itself. For the observer who leaves the darkened room of the camera obscura and experiences the world through direct sense impressions, the locus of truth and power becomes his or her physical

body.³⁹ The increasing relevance of both observing ‘in the field’ and the reflexive character of embodied experience in the making of science attest to the emergence of this new (ideal) figure of the observer.

The emergence of these new observational practices can be traced in the visual archive of philosophical travel.⁴⁰ The work of the naturalist William Burchell provides a case in point. Amidst the numerous drawings which he produced on St Helena between 1805 and 1810, when he was employed as a botanist for the East India Company, there is a small but remarkable sketch entitled a ‘Group of Plantains from Nature’, dated 20 February 1807 (Figure 1). Upon this sketch, now in the archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, are drops of the plantain’s own juice, which have fallen on the page whether by accident or design. These drops are themselves used as a sort of evidence – ‘not blood but drops of Plantain juice’, writes Burchell in annotating his sketch.⁴¹ In this way, the visual image becomes something more than mere representation: stained red by the specimen itself, the very scrap of paper itself acquires scientific value. No longer just an ‘illustration’, Burchell’s sketch provides confirmation of the authentic presence of the observer in the field, thereby affirming his credibility as a faithful witness.

Burchell’s vast body of work, arising from his travels in South Africa (1810-1815) and Brazil (1815-1830), provides a clear instance of a naturalist using his artistic skills in tandem with his scientific expertise, in order to provide what he regarded as an accurate record of the features of landscapes, peoples, flora and fauna he encountered.⁴² In a broader context, it signals the extent to which the boundaries between science and art were being redefined within this new field of vision. The practice of drawing in the field was not merely a way of illustrating, or decorating, texts: it was becoming a mode of scientific expression in itself. In this sense, Goethe provided a paradigm: in response to Schiller’s suggestion that he write a novel based on eighteenth-century Pacific travel

literature, he lamented that he lacked the first-hand visual experience ('das unmittelbare Anschauen') that came with being on-the-spot.⁴³ Indeed words alone were inadequate to such a task; as Goethe put it, philosophers 'ought to talk less and draw more. I, personally, should like to renounce speech altogether and, like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches'.⁴⁴

Goethe's concerns are echoed in Alexander von Humboldt's account of the 'expression of tropical scenery' in the work of travelling artists:

Sketches drawn from Nature, can alone, after the return from the voyage, enable us to represent in more elaborate landscapes the peculiarities of distant regions; they will be all the more perfect if the artist has, at the same time, drawn or painted from Nature in the open air a great number of separate studies of the top of trees, leafy branches well covered with blossoms of fruit,... .The possession of these studies from Nature, accurately designed and sketched, can alone prevent the artist, upon his return, from being misled by the assistance which he obtains from hot-house plants and the so-called botanical pictures.⁴⁵

Humboldt was intrigued by the new techniques of visual projection emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially dioramas and panoramas, which could he argued play a useful role in conveying the 'magical effect' of tropical nature ('those prospects in which Nature abounds in the wild luxuriance and fullness of life') to European audiences. In a well-designed panorama, 'removed from all the disturbances of realities', the spectator would feel 'himself surrounded with strange scenery'.⁴⁶ William Burchell too experimented with panoramas on a smaller scale, producing topographical panoramas of Belém do Pará and Rio de Janeiro in the 1820s.

The fashion for panoramas provided another link between spectacle, mapping and landscape, and eventually had a distinct influence on the scale and colour of landscapes exhibited at the Royal Academy.⁴⁷

In his own narratives of tropical travel, Humboldt was actively engaged in the construction of the figure of the ‘observer-in-transit’, to whom the voyage presented the occasion for reflecting not only about points of view for landscape prospects but also for enquiring about the observer’s own capacity to observe.⁴⁸ The reputation of the explorer’s knowledge depended ultimately on establishing credibility; on building trust in observation at a distance.⁴⁹ As Dorinda Outram argues, ‘such trust could be built up by means of authorship, and it is not surprising that many explorers, most notoriously Alexander von Humboldt, invested perhaps as much in writing the narrative of travel as they did in travelling itself’.⁵⁰ In addition, Humboldt’s penchant for experimentation with graphic representations in the form of thematic maps, isolines, and graphs, among other devices, suggests that he was constantly ‘looking for a language at once highly descriptive but also analytical’.⁵¹ At the same time, his use of images and words was conceived as a way of conveying emotions, of evoking the sensibility of the cultivated European mind seeking to comprehend the pattern of nature.⁵²

It should now be clear that far from being entirely discrete, practices of visual representation in the spheres of aesthetics and natural science were in many respects intermingled in the Georgian period. We have considered, briefly, some aspects of the skills and techniques common to both, and some of the available philosophical foundations for uniting, or at least connecting, aesthetic and scientific concerns. Yet these philosophical systems, notably that of Humboldt himself, were precisely that – philosophies of nature – and it would be wrong to assume from them that somehow the actual practices of the artist and the natural philosopher simply became one and the

same. In this context, it becomes important to consider the institutional regulation of the art market and the evolving profession of the artist. How could the travelling artist reconcile the new philosophies of naturalism with existing aesthetic conventions? To what extent could the tropical view acquire the status of landscape art?

‘Strange colouring’: William Havell’s tropical landscapes

On 9 February 1816, the painter William Havell departed from England on board H. M. S. Alceste employed as a draughtsman in Lord Amherst’s diplomatic mission to China. After calling at Madeira, the ship made for Rio de Janeiro, following the usual transatlantic route, where she remained for ten days before proceeding to the East Indies via the Cape of Good Hope. On its return voyage from Macao, on 26 January 1817, the Alceste was wrecked off the Sumatra coast, with the loss of most of the embassy’s possessions.⁵³ Having escaped the wreck, William Havell took a passage to India in the Lyra under Captain Basil Hall, remaining there for nearly nine years. During his stay in India, he made his living by painting portraits of East India Company officials and Army officers, as well as landscapes.⁵⁴

It has been suggested that Havell’s decision to leave England at the age of 34 and in the middle of a promising career was a reaction to the British Institution’s refusal to exhibit his largest and most ambitious oil painting – Walnut Gathering at Petersham (a picture that now known only by an engraving).⁵⁵ According to Roget, who wrote what has now become the standard history of the Society of Painters in Watercolour, Havell boasted that his skill in executing this picture surpassed even that of Turner.⁵⁶ But the authorities at the British Institution Committee dismissed it as mere experiment:

the painting was ‘nothing but light!’.⁵⁷ While Havell’s disappointment may have influenced his decision to travel abroad, the foregoing discussion of relationships between art, science, nature and travel may suggest other interpretations. Following the wreck of the Alceste in the Gaspar Straits, after all, Havell could well have returned to England with other members of the diplomatic mission. However, in the event he stayed in India for nine years, only returning to England in the wake of a cholera epidemic.⁵⁸ Two years later, in 1828, he travelled again to southern climes, spending two fruitful years in Italy.⁵⁹ Even though he complained about the heat – saying that it was as bad as in Bombay – Southern skies continued to have their attractions.⁶⁰

The tropical landscapes produced by Havell in Brazil and in India are of particular interest here insofar they provide evidence of his ‘experimental’ approach to painting.⁶¹ Rather than understanding his journey south as a matter of the moment, an impulsive response to disappointment, Havell’s change of direction could rather be understood as the search for a laboratory, where he could carry out his graphic experiments with light and colour in a greater degree of freedom. The impulse to travel amongst Havell and his contemporaries cannot of course be reduced merely to intellectual aspirations or artistic pursuits. A depressed metropolitan economy in the aftermath of Waterloo accelerated competition between artists; at the same time, a new wave of old masters from continental collections was on the market. Travelling abroad was thus an appropriate project for an artist in his mid-thirties who considered his chosen profession under threat of failure. My concern here however is less with the artistic merits of Havell’s work in itself than with its contribution to the understanding of the methods of the ‘observer-in-transit’; and specifically to the problem of translating the experience of travelling in the tropics into a pictorial language.

It was probably through his connection with his uncle Robert Havell, an engraver and printer in London, that William Havell first became acquainted with the methods of Turner and Thomas Girtin, as well as the exotic landscapes by Thomas Daniell and his nephew William.⁶² At the age of twenty, Havell had travelled through North Wales, in the company of John and Cornelius Varley, Joshua Cristall, and Thomas Webster (a geologist as well as an architect). This pioneering group was later to be dubbed the 'Varley circle'; a group that, as Charlotte Klonk points out, 'modified the practice of sketching in two important respects: first, they sketched extensively in colour on the spot rather than just preparing pencil outlines; and, second, they elevated the status of the sketch done outdoors to a work in its own right which was worthy of exhibition.'⁶³ Although Klonk is right to emphasise the role of the Varley circle in the development of naturalistic painting, we might note here that while two of Cornelius Varley's sketches painted on the spot were exhibited as finished paintings, this does not mean that the status of the open-air sketch was universally held to have been elevated.⁶⁴

In the present context, what deserves attention is Klonk's emphasis on the importance of open-air sketching to Cornelius Varley's later development as both scientist and artist. She argues that Varley's inability to translate natural phenomena into finished paintings gave direction to his scientific activity, which materialized in the development of his graphic telescope (1805), a drawing instrument. Klonk focusses her analysis on the degree to which the artist departed from compositional formulae; for Cornelius Varley, the accurate visual depiction of a particular phenomenon seems to have been more important than the construction of a defined pictorial space. Open-air sketching was certainly relevant for Havell's work as well, especially given that he too applied his technical knowledge in the development of photogenic drawings. In order to explore this further, we may consider Havell's oil sketch of the Braganza shore in Rio, a

place now called Niterói, made on his visit in the Alceste in 1816 (Figure 2). In view of its small size (about 8 by 11 cm), this was surely a sketch made ‘on the spot’. This image is very much a matter of brushwork, a study in light and colour. However, we can see Havell laying the foundations for a more finished picture, in the sense that it is a composed view. The problem with oil in open-air is that its wet pigments reflected light, altering one’s sense of sense. Many landscape painters had faced the problem before: in Italy, for example, some of them chose to paint from a window, or to employ a parasol.⁶⁵ Havell, however, had concocted a recipe to avoid such effects: ‘Copal varnish mixed with sugar of lead to make all the colours dry immediately’.⁶⁶ By such means, Havell hoped to combine landscape as perceived with his creative artistic sensibility.

A watercolour from the same date testifies to Havell’s wanderings in the neighbourhood of the city of Rio de Janeiro during his brief stay in 1816 (Figure 3).⁶⁷ This picture should be seen in the context of what we know of Havell’s earlier participation in the meetings of the London Sketching Society.⁶⁸ Rather than drawing inspiration from the classics, however, Havell’s prime source for this study was the landscape of Rio itself. Although its composition is in accordance with basic picturesque rules, this study offers a richer range of tones and a greater subtlety in the description of light and shade, due to the combination of coloured washes and white bodycolour. (It is in his 1821 oil painting of Coromandel Coast, however, that the brilliancy of light and colours are at their most impressive: Figure 4). In trying to depict tropical atmosphere as presented to his eyes, Havell was creating a visual language that proved to be profoundly anti-academic. If Havell subsequently re-worked some of his studies to compose finished paintings, as in the case of his 1827 Garden Scene on the Braganza Shore (Figure 5), his way of colouring defied academic rules. When it was

exhibited at the Watercolour Society, this work was subjected to severe criticism of its use of bodycolour.⁶⁹

The fact that some of these images are likely to have been open-air sketches, together with the variety of media employed (watercolour, bodycolour, and oil), highlights Havell's experimental approach to painting. If Southern skies encouraged a new approach to colour and light, the experience of observation-in-the-field also presented a challenge to the artist's *métier*. The fact that Havell exhibited so few of his tropical landscapes indicates the sheer difficulty of reconciling the two.⁷⁰ In this respect, the ambivalent response to a selection of Havell's work from Italy and elsewhere exhibited in 1842 is telling: 'Havell still retains his strange colouring which renders most of his subjects unpleasing. We well remember the scenery but cannot recognise it in the effect of colouring of Mr. Havell. His method unpoetises nature'.⁷¹

The suggestion that Havell's method 'unpoetises nature' coincided, significantly, with his experiments in photogeny, in partnership with his brother Frederick James. Having learned Henry Fox Talbot's secret of fixing the image in 1839, the Havells worked out a process 'for the delineation of the work of the artist's pencil', a process they claimed to be exactly the reverse of Talbot's, in which 'you make the powers of nature work for you'.⁷² What might be noted in this context is that a process involving the instrumentalization of sight comparable to that identified by Svetlana Alpers in Dutch seventeenth-century art is under development. Be that as it may, there is a fundamental difference from the techniques of the camera obscura; as Jonathan Crary suggests, the observer now leaves the protected dark room in which the exterior world is reflected in order to make sensory observations out-of-doors.⁷³ The idea of an 'unpoetised nature' dramatises the divide between art and science; at the moment of

transition between Georgian and Victorian tastes, the battle between accurate depiction and artistic inspiration is once again at stake.

Through the materiality of paint in canvas or pencil on card, the tropical landscapes of William Havell testify to the interactive character of art. Rather than products of pure subjectivity, these landscapes highlight the intermingled effects of contemporary innovations in techniques of scientific and artistic observation. They also express part of what Havell knew, part of what he saw, part of what he learned by voyaging, and part of what he had forgotten. These tropical landscapes are, above all, the result of a constant negotiation between the actual and the ideal, a process which required Havell to reconcile the representation of landscapes in situ with the demands of his metropolitan audience.

While Havell found it difficult to adjust his painterly style when returning home, other travelling artists, such as Conrad Martens and Augustus Earle, were reluctant to return from their travels abroad.⁷⁴ Earle was eventually compelled to do so due to poor health, while Martens remained for the rest of his life in New South Wales following the Beagle voyage. The colonial élite provided a ready market for their views and visions which they could not find in the metropolis. This depended on the elevation of the colonial landscape itself as appropriate subject-matter for the production of a work of art, as well as the development of a visual grammar appropriate to the distinctive light, colour and landscapes of the Southern hemisphere. Such works of art helped to provide colonial communities in Australia and elsewhere with a distinct identity from the metropolis, yet authenticated by metropolitan pictorial conventions and techniques.

In this chapter, I have chosen to emphasise the unsettling consequences of the art of tropical travel. In comparison with the monarch-of-all-I-survey, the observer-in-transit is a less triumphal figure, though of course one encumbered by all sorts of cultural baggage. We have got so used to thinking of the imperial eye of European travellers in and beyond the tropics that we have paid less attention to the problems which voyaging could pose both for individual travellers and for metropolitan conventions. As Greg Dening puts it, perhaps travellers' eyes 'sometimes see things that they did not expect to see'.⁷⁵ My reading of Havell's tropical landscapes suggests one way of getting closer to the visual worlds which those travellers had to negotiate in order to make sense of their experience. There are many others still to be explored.

Notes

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¹ C. Martens, Journal of a Voyage from England to Australia 1833-35 (Sydney, State Library of New South Wales Press, 1994), p. 9.

² Martens, Journal, p. 8.

³ L. Martins, O Rio de Janeiro dos Viajantes: O Olhar Britânico, 1800-1850 (Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar, 2001).

⁴ On which, see P. Berger, H. G. Mathias, D. Mello Júnior (eds.), Pinturas e Pintores do Rio Antigo (Rio de Janeiro, Livraria Kosmos, 1990); A. M. M. Beluzzo, The Voyager's Brazil (São Paulo, Metalivros, 1995); K. E. Manthorne, Tropical Renaissance: North American Artists Exploring North America, 1839-1879 (Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989); R. Wagner and J. Bandeira, Viagem ao Brasil nas Aquarelas de Thomas Ender, 1817-1818, 3 vols. (Petrópolis, Kapa Editorial, 2000); M. L. P. Horta (ed.), Visões do Rio na Coleção Geyer (Petrópolis, Museum Imperial e Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2000); and G. Ferrez, Iconografia do Rio de Janeiro, 1530-1890, 2 vols. (Rio de Janeiro, Casa Jorge Editorial, 2000).

⁵ See L. Martins, 'Mapping tropical waters: British views and visions of Rio de Janeiro', in D. Cosgrove (ed.), Mappings (London, Reaktion Books, 1998), pp. 148-68; and F. Driver and L. Martins, 'John Septimus Roe and the art of navigation, c. 1815-1830', History Workshop Journal, 54 (2002) 148-65.

⁶ P. Howard, 'Painters' preferred places', Journal of Historical Geography, 11:2 (1985), pp. 138-54; and S. Faunce, 'Rome and its environs: painters, travelers, and sites', in P. Conisbee, S. Faunce and J. Strick (eds.), In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996).

⁷ D. H. Solkin (ed.) Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836 (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001); B. F. Tobin, Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1999).

⁸ For a detailed account of these categories, see A. Hemingway, Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹ See A. Lyles, 'The transformation of the British landscape watercolour c. 1750-1805', in A. Lyles and R. Hamley (eds.) British Watercolours from the Oppé Collection (London, Tate Gallery, 1997); K. D. Kriz, The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 57-79; C. Klonk, Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late-Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996); and Hemingway, Landscape Imagery, pp. 79-104.

¹⁰ W. Burchell, Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa, vol. II [1824] (London, Batchworth Press, 1953), p. 396. The use of printed images to convey empirical data in the same period is considered in S. Smiles, Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain, 1770-1830 (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000).

¹¹ S. Daniels, Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994); Hemingway, Landscape

Imagery; W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), Landscape and Power (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹² Kriz, The Idea of the English Landscape Painter, p. 109.

¹³ See M. L. Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London, Routledge, 1992); Mitchell, Landscape and Power; S. Ryan, The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ D. Ferrer, 'The interaction of verbal and pictorial elements in the genesis of Eugène Delacroix's Sultan of Morocco', Word and Image 13:2 (1997), pp. 183-191.

¹⁵ A similar discomfort was experienced by British travellers in Italy: see C. Powell, Italy in the Age of Turner: "the Garden of the World" (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1998), pp. 68-89.

¹⁶ L. Martins, 'A naturalist's vision of the tropics: Charles Darwin and the Brazilian landscape', Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography 21:1 (2000), pp. 19-33.

¹⁷ L. Bell, 'To see or not to see: conflicting eyes in the travel art of Augustus Earle, in J. F. Codell and D. S. Macleod (eds.), Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1998), p. 130.

¹⁸ D. B. Brown, Oil Sketches from Nature: Turner and his Contemporaries (London, Tate Gallery, 1991), p. 17.

¹⁹ See C. Greppi, 'On the spot: l'artista viaggiatore e l'inventario iconografico del mondo (1772-1859)', Geotema, (1997) 137-49; Hemingway, Landscape Imagery, pp. 19-23. It is important to emphasise, however, that an increasing interest in the empirical observation of nature does not necessarily entail a direct confrontation with nature; in seventeenth-century Dutch art, Svetlana Alpers argues, this interest led to an increasing trust in optical devices, such as the camera obscura and the microscope. See S. Alpers,

The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century (London, Penguin Books, 1989), pp. 32-3.

²⁰ Brown, Oil Sketches from Nature, pp. 23-4.

²¹ Conisbee, Faunce and Strick, 'Introduction', in In the Light of Italy, p. 15.

²² Klonk, Science and the Perception of Nature, p. 107.

²³ P. Conisbee, 'The early history of open-air painting', in Conisbee, Faunce and Strick, In the Light of Italy, pp. 29-47.

²⁴ K. Sloan, Alexander and John Robert Cozens: The Poetry of Landscape (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 22, 26. On Christ's hospital and the training of naval surveyors, see Driver and Martins, 'John Septimus Roe and the art of navigation'. Cozens' appointment was far from unique: the Royal Military College at Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire opened in May 1802 with the artist William Alexander as the first Master of Landscape Drawing (William Alexander: An English Artist in Imperial China, Brighton, Royal Pavillion, Art Gallery and Museums, 1981), p. 8. On the links between landscape painting, military draughtsmanship and cartography, see N. Alfrey, 'Landscape and the Ordnance Survey, 1795-1829' in N. Alfrey and S. Daniels (eds.), Mapping the Landscape: Essays on Art and Cartography (Nottingham, University Art Gallery, 1990), p. 23.

²⁵ Lyles, 'The Transformation of the British Landscape Watercolour', p. 22

²⁶ Conisbee, Faunce and Strick, In the Light of Italy, pp. 110-11.

²⁷ B. Smith, 'William Hodges and English plein-air painting', Art History, 6:2 (1983), 143-52.

²⁸ Smith, 'William Hodges and English plein-air painting', p. 144.

²⁹ It is worth noting that on Cook's first voyage, the challenge of satisfying diverse audiences resulted in the appointment of two artists to accompany Banks, Alexander

Buchan (whose work was directed at dilettanti) and Sydney Parkinson (who was hired to provide sketches of new species): S. Schaffer, 'Visions of empire: afterword', in D. P. Miller and P. H. Reill, Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representation of Nature (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁰ Quoted in Smith, 'William Hodges and English plein-air painting', p. 151.

³¹ Lyles, 'The Transformation of the British Landscape Watercolour', p. 20.

³² Lyles, 'The Transformation of the British Landscape Watercolour', p. 21.

³³ Klonk, Science and the Perception of Nature, p. 67.

³⁴ The popularity of topographical engravings beyond academic artistic circles guaranteed the living of many artists in this period; see Lyles, 'The Transformation of the British Landscape Watercolour', p. 20.

³⁵ Quoted in G. Denning, Readings/Writings (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1998), p. 8.

³⁶ J. Hamilton, Turner and the Scientists (London, Tate Gallery, 1998).

³⁷ J. Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, 1995), p. 70.

³⁸ Crary, Techniques of the Observer, p. 79.

³⁹ See also D. Poole, Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 81-4.

⁴⁰ B. M. Stafford, Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760-1840 (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1984); B. Smith, European Vision and the South Pacific (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1988).

⁴¹ W. Burchell, St. Helena Plants (Kew Archives, n. d.).

⁴² On Burchell, see Martins, O Rio de Janeiro dos Viajantes, pp. 115-24; F. Driver, Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire (Oxford, Blackwell, 2001), pp. 17-19.

⁴³ L. Bodi, 'Captain Cook in German imaginative literature', in W. Veit (ed.), Captain James Cook: Image and Impact. South Sea Discoveries and the World of Letters (Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1972), pp. 129-30.

⁴⁴ W. H. Auden and E. Mayer, 'Introduction', in J. W. Goethe, Italian Journey [1786-8] (London, Penguin Books, 1970), p. 9.

⁴⁵ A. von Humboldt, Kosmos: A General Study of the Physical Phenomena of the Universe, vol. II (London, Hippolyte Baillièrre, 1848), pp. 85-86.

⁴⁶ Humboldt, Kosmos, p. 91.

⁴⁷ A. Bermingham, 'Landscape-o-rama: the exhibition landscape at Somerset House and the rise of popular landscape entertainments' in Solkin, Art on the Line, p. 129.

⁴⁸ F. Sússekind, O Brasil Não é Longe Daqui: O Narrador, A Viagem (São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1990), p. 122.

⁴⁹ Driver, Geography Militant, pp. 50-6; C. Withers, 'Voyages et crédibilité: vers une géographie de la confiance', Géographie et Cultures, 33 (2000), 3-19.

⁵⁰ D. Outram, 'On being Perseus: new knowledge, dislocation and Enlightenment exploration' in D. Livingstone and C. Withers (eds.), Geography and Enlightenment (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1999), pp. 283-4.

⁵¹ A. Godlewska, 'From Enlightenment vision to modern science? Humboldt's visual thinking', in Livingstone and Withers, Geography and Enlightenment, p. 267.

⁵² M. Dettelbach, 'The face of nature: Precise measurement, mapping and sensibility in the work of Alexander von Humboldt', Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences, 30:4 (1999), p. 503.

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- ⁵³ H. M. S. Alceste, Muster Book (Adm 37/5730, PRO).
- ⁵⁴ F. Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', in William Havell 1782-1857 (Reading, Reading Museum & Art Gallery, 1981), pp. 14-15.
- ⁵⁵ Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', p. 14; Lyles and Hamley, British Watercolours, p. 208.
- ⁵⁶ J. L. Roget, A History of the Old Watercolour Society, vol. I (London, Longman, 1891), p. 296.
- ⁵⁷ Examiner, 7 May 1815, p. 302.
- ⁵⁸ Havell travelled through India, from east to west, visiting Calcutta (1817), Madras (1819-20), Hyderabad (1822), Ellora (1825) and Bombay (1826): Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', p. 15.
- ⁵⁹ Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', pp. 15-16.
- ⁶⁰ Roget, A History of the Old Watercolour Society, p. 450.
- ⁶¹ L. Martins, 'A pintura inquieta da paisagem tropical: William Havell (1782-1857)', in H. A. Salgueiro (ed.), Paisagem e Arte (São Paulo, São Paulo University, 2000), pp. 121-128.
- ⁶² Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', p. 17. Interestingly, Robert Havell later published panoramic views of various sites around the world, including (in 1820) an aquatint panoramic view of Madras, in which William Havell may have had a hand.
- ⁶³ Klonk, Science and the Perception of Nature, p. 101.
- ⁶⁴ The works mentioned by Klonk - Ross Market Place, Herefordshire and S.E. View of St Albans - were exhibited in 1805 at the newly established Water-Colour Society: Science and the Perception of Nature, pp. 107-109.
- ⁶⁵ Powell, Italy in the Age of Turner, p. 73; Conisbee, 'The Early History of Open-Air Painting', pp. 44-6.

⁶⁶ Brown, Oil Sketches from Nature, p. 24.

⁶⁷ This is one of the two watercolours of Rio de Janeiro by William Havell now held by the British Museum.

⁶⁸ J. Hamilton, The Sketching Society 1799-1851 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1971), p. 7.

⁶⁹ Owen, 'Life and work of William Havell', pp. 14-15.

⁷⁰ Havell kept the sketches of his voyages, some of which were used to illustrate B. Hall, Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea, and the Great Loo-Choo Island (London, 1818). The Christie and Mason sale catalogue of his remaining works listed four sketchbooks of the Alceste voyage, twenty-three volumes of Chinese drawings and a finished watercolour drawing of Rio. See Catalogue of the whole of the remaining works of that talented and respected artist, William Havell, Esq, deceased... (Christie and Mason, 1858).

⁷¹ Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (1842), Royal Academy. Soon after his return from India, one reviewer of Havell's work exhibited at the Watercolour Society had commented on its 'clashing light and shade' (Examiner, 1827); another critic had later described his Temple of Vesta at the Royal Academy as 'another of Mr Havell's yolk of egg pictures' (Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1840).

⁷² Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 45 (1839), pp. 382-391.

⁷³ Crary, Techniques of the Observer, pp. 38-39, 138-141.

⁷⁴ M. Rosenthal, 'The extraordinary Mr Earle', in The World Upside Down: Australia 1788-1830 (Canberra, National Library of Australia, 2000), pp. 35-41.

⁷⁵ Denning, Readings/Writings, p. 76.