

LANDSCAPE OF SOLITUDE

ENCOUNTERING IMAGES OF CONTEMPLATION
IN WESTERN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

静寂的山水

John H. Zhang



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Preface



The English term "landscape painting" refers to the type of painting that takes natural scenery as the main visual motif. It has been an independent pictorial form in China since the fifth century and in Europe from the sixteenth century. The Chinese term 山水画 (mountain-and-water painting) is almost an exact equivalent to the English term since the two characters "mountain and water" put together means broadly the concept of the English landscape. However, in order to distinguish the two, the Chinese use the characters 风景画 for the Western landscapes, which means literally "view painting" or "scenic painting," or "painting of natural sceneries." I remember my conversation with a Chinese painter several years ago. We meandered into a discussion in Chinese on landscape paintings of the East and the West. I kept using the same term "landscape painting" in reference to both Chinese and Western landscapes, eliciting his correction each time: "Landscape painting," or "mountain-and-water painting" in Chinese is a wrong term for the Western form. He explained that "landscape painting" can only apply to Chinese painting, and the correct term for the Western painting is the painting of sceneries. According to him, the Western landscape generally aims at a reflection of the actual topography, while the Chinese painting is always a representation of the mind. Thus the Western landscape painting falls into a different mien than that of the Chinese Counterpart.

When, some time afterwards, I checked to Chinese dictionary definitions, I found some literal truth behind his distinctions. The English term landscape painting is translated into "scene painting" and "landscape painter" into "scene painter" in Chinese. This suggests to us that the Chinese' customary understanding of the Western genre is a mere representation of the artist's direct view of natural settings or for the most part an imitation of nature. In a way, there is no landscape painting in the West going by the Chinese sense of the word. The Western form of painting does not exude the same visual and spiritual quality as its Chinese counterpart. Apparently this mutual exclusion misleads; the great variety of landscape paintings in the West seem to be unseen, its high artistic and spiritual quality is at the stake of being belittled; and its long and multifaceted path of development tends to be

Ignored. This misunderstanding, and the desire to reverse it, turned into the seminal conception of this project.



Fig. 1 Yun Shou-ping (1633-1690), *Landscape*, ink on paper, Qing Dynasty, 1678.

In the following two landscapes (Figs. 1-2), one by the Chinese landscape painter Yun Shou-ping (1633-1690) and the other by the German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), we may see immediately that the landscape paintings of East and West are indeed very different. The Chinese equate landscape painting with a cult of solitude and a search for the "soul of nature." Obviously the artist does not seek to depict a particular place at a particular time in this painting. It works as an abstraction, a kind of "second reality," drawn from the artist's own memory or from his imagination. The use of brush and ink seems to have helped enhance the impression of being otherworldly and reflective. It provides a solitary retreat or a utopian escape from earthly troubles. It is an image of solitude that is contemplative and deep in thought.

A certain kind of faithful realism, missing from Yun Shou-ping's painting, can hardly be missed in Friedrich's landscape. The German painter seemed to have endeavored to achieve an optical realism with a scientific approach. Consequently the spiritual quality of the painting is not readily seen and to be neglected at first sight. However, a closer look will reveal that the painting is far more than a mere portrayal of a vista in the countryside or a record of the actual scenery. The transcription of scenery was clearly not the artist's aim. Despite the minute observation of nature, the spiritual quality of the work, the interweaving of the human thought and landscape, and its meditation on the human ideal of existence are not to be ignored. The solitary tree, just as an example, conveys a compelling sense of isolation.

The shepherd is a motif that originates in the Western myth of the Golden Age, the human fantasy of ideal life, and the pastoral tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The darkened atmosphere in the foreground accentuates the mood of contemplation. The sun-drenched background and the spatial depth probably signify high aspiration and a yearning for a world beyond. Just like in a Chinese painting, the artist pays great attention to his inner



Fig. 2 Caspar David Friedrich, *The Solitary Tree*, 1822.

feelings, to the mental and emotional part of the artistic process, though at the same time objectivism and techniques are not neglected. Unmistakably, Friedrich's landscape also conveys a poetic feeling and a transcendent significance, providing likewise a solitary retreat and a particular setting for meditation. The presence of the sheep and shepherd associates the scene with the antique pastoral past; the isolated oak tree, the lonely human figure, and the subdued light of the sky, help create a profound contemplative mood. Thus underneath the coating of realism, his painting conveys as much spirituality as the Chinese painting. The artist's inner life, his thoughts and feelings, his intellectual concerns are clearly there, contemplating the past and future from the perspective of the present. It is also a visionary landscape of a solitary mind, creating a sense of the transcendental and the human longing for the infinite, for a moral purity and truth.



Fig. 3 Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden*, c. 1459. Tempera on wood, 81x 127 cm. National Gallery, London.

The spiritual quality of the Western landscape has actually merited the recognition and lengthy studies by generations of Western scholars. As early as the fifteenth century, landscape paintings were no longer undertaken for merely decorative purposes. Often religiously themed, these landscapes would convey a spiritual luminosity. For instance, in the fifteenth century Giovanni Bellini of Venice painted landscapes that openly convey human emotions. His *Agony in the Garden* shows a severe landscape scene with a deep religious feeling (Fig. 3). Painted around 1565, the

theme is about the time when Christ retired to the Mount of Olives to pray, right after the last supper and before his arrest. At present were Peter, James, and John, but they are all fast asleep on the ground. The position of Christ shows that he is withdrawn apart from them, whose reclining bodies seem to have become part of the landscape. There are a group of soldiers run in the background, but their presence in the picture is quite symbolic and apparently separate from the happening in the foreground. In the sky on the right there appears an angel bringing Christ relief and strength. However, the angelic image is only vaguely painted in pale white, probably appealing more to viewers' mind than to their eyes. Added to the feeling of serenity and composure is Bellini's successful creation of an overall continuity of space in the composition. In addition, the stylized treatment of the land with a limited palette helps to put forward an austere appearance of the setting, bringing effectively to mind the critical moment of the New Testament. Purposefully arranged at the edge of the cloudy sky, the rosy light of dawn seems to diffuse out of Christ's penitent hands, lifting into the sky an alleviation of Christ's anguish. This is the new dawn, a definite ray of hope and regeneration for all Christian followers. Bellini has achieved a unique religious and emotional unity of expression in this painting. Landscape was without a doubt already an expressive element in the artist's thoughts and practice.

The sixteenth century saw the rise of the Danube school in the region of the Danube River valley between Regensburg and Vienna. The artists constructed landscapes with exotic rocks and stones to create a sense of awe and to convey a religious feeling.¹ The Venetian artists created a poetic landscape with the unifying theme as "pastoral tranquility." Their "lovely place" replete with melancholy shepherds, huntsmen, nymphs, and sometimes hermit saints brought a new latitude and vitality to the genre of painting. The rise of Ideal or Classical landscape paintings in the seventeenth century in Italy raised the landscape art to a new height. Works by Annibale Carracci, Poussin, and Claude Lorrain further enriched the expressive quality of landscape painting with a pastoral scene and mood. In fact, their landscapes are comparable to the genre of history painting both in degrees of intellectualism and significance. Carracci's *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* is a case in point (Fig. 4). This painting presents an idealized nature with a noble and majestic quality. A carefully constructed scene, it contains all the pastoral "props" necessary as part of the idyllic life of the antiquity: the tranquil hills, mute streams, stately trees, unruffled foliage, a serene

¹It was a loose group of artists from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Attracted by the natural beauty of the Danube Valley in southern Germany, they gathered together to draw and painted an intensely romantic scenery. The few most important artists of the school include Lucas Cranach the elder, Albrecht Altdorfer, and Wolfgang Huber.

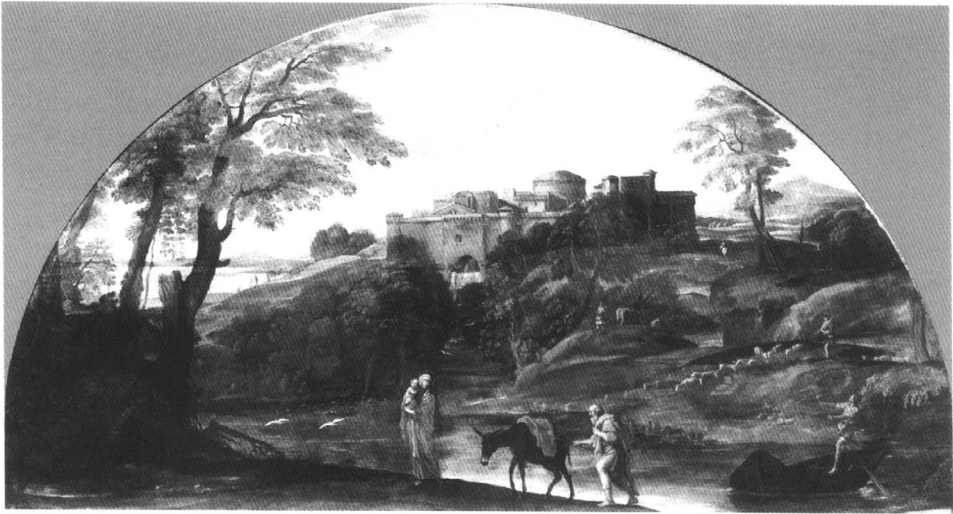


Fig. 4 Annibale Carracci, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*, 1603-04. Oil on canvas, approx. 122 x 228.5 cm, Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome

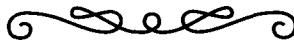
sky, grandiose architecture, and shepherds with their flocks, etc. Nature is represented not as what it is, but as what the artists think it ought to be.

Similarly, the seventeenth-century Dutch landscape is not just a simple reproduction of real scenery. It is distinguished by a great variety and *expressive* richness. Artists explored almost all aspects of their landscape, from fields of corn, rivers, and canals to country roads and inns. Their landscapes were not simply prompted by sheer aesthetic judgments, but primarily encouraged by the idea that the natural world is an embodiment of the bounty of God. In the eighteenth century, the Italian Arcadian vision and the Dutch naturalistic tradition came together, landscape art became more popular and important. Theories of the sublime and the picturesque came into circulation, adding to the meaning and intellectual attribute of the genre. In the nineteenth century, landscape painting moved further away from natural topography and there appeared more and more pictures evocative of meditations and deep thoughts. We see a new sensibility in the landscape, ranging from Friedrich's intense spirituality to Constable's simple and quiet scenes of contemplation. More frequently, landscape painters began to interpret nature through their own sentimentality. Instead of the idealized view of nature and the sublime notions with awesome spectacles of mountains, forests, and atmospheric tones, we see more the inner vision of the painter. As a result, the old hierarchy of the genres was at last crumbled and landscape painting attained a new supremacy, revealing its full strength in the expression of passionate and tremulous feeling. Indeed, landscape painting, like everything else in the sweep of Modernism, garnered an unprecedented lyricism.

Evidently landscape painting in the West is as phenomenal a thing as it is in China. Far more than just a prosaic rendition of actual sceneries, the Western landscape painting likewise expressed the soul of the artist, which often reflected to the ethos of the times. Many believe that a key to the Chinese landscape is a tendency to communicate a sense of solitude, or a sense of Zen or Tao. My study, then, will focus on the concept of solitude with an emphasis on landscapes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the West. I took my cue for the theme of solitude in the Western landscape from a book now neglected in the art historical literature: Chaucey Brewster Tinker's *Painting and Poet: Studies in the Literary Relations of English Painting*. To the best of my knowledge Tinker is the only scholar to date to apply the concept of solitude in this context with some seriousness and depth. I applied Tinker's insights into the landscapes of the eighteenth-century English painter, Richard Wilson, to the landscape tradition beginning in Venice in the fifteenth century and extending up to the nineteenth century. In so doing, I found a commonality in landscapes of the East and the West and was able to examine Western landscapes from a new perspective. Although we still cannot say that there are more similarities than differences between paintings of the East and the West, we may at least say that Chinese landscape painting is not necessarily an entirely different thing from that of the West. Both painting traditions reflect a similar aspect of spiritual life and practice.

Chapter I

Introduction: The Landscape of Solitude and a Definition



Landscape is both a physical and cultural construct.¹ We live in it, make physical changes to it, farming, reshaping, building, and constructing all types of modern facilities. We also think, imagine, write about it, and even paint images of it for further appreciation or admiration. Consequently we develop an emotional and symbolic attachment to the landscape and find in it contentment and mental stimulation. Writers, poets, and artists express their feelings and convey their thoughts about the landscape while describing tangible features of nature. During the process of their creative inspiration, regardless of the actual appearance of the natural scenery, they bring into being their own visions of it, composing landscapes of the mind rather than mere records of reality. Landscapes in both writing and painting reflect not only what we see, but also how we view and conceive of the landscape based on our changing perceptions or predilections. Therefore, in a way, we have constantly modified or altered the natural landscape, and conceived landscapes at our own will. As a consequence, landscape has been "designed by human beings."² It is more a cultural construct than a physical phenomenon, carrying political, religious, symbolical, and ideological meanings. Hence in his *The Culture of Nature*, Alexander Wilson identifies landscape as an intricate discourse socially constructed.³ In a similar way, Daniels and Cosgrove define the landscape "as a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings."⁴ Hence human sentiments and attitudes towards nature have been an important force in shaping the art of landscape painting. Artists'

¹Carl O. Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," in *University of California Publications in Geography*, ed. Carl O. Sauer, vol. 2, No. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1929), pp. 25-26. Sauer defines landscape as "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural." He considers landscape as having an organic quality, and he introduces the point that we cannot understand a landscape without seeing it as "an organic unit" and comprehending "land and life in terms of each other."

²See Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized: The View in Landscape History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 2.

³Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 14. Wilson writes: "In the broadest sense of the term, landscape is a way of seeing the world and imagining our relationship to nature. It is something we think, do, and make as a social collective."

and their patrons' views of life and nature determine which properties of the landscape to represent, and then what human concerns to convey via current artistic standards. Artists would often join the landscape with their own inner life and create scenes for a spiritual being or an imaginative journey.

In his recent study of art displayed in contemporary American homes, David Halle discovers that landscape pictures are the first in popularity in all the neighborhoods of various social classes he surveyed. Importantly his study shows further that almost all the landscape pictures he sampled are about "a sedate and tranquil nature" with few or no human figures, and that people's general reason for preferring landscapes to other genres is "above all the tranquility of the subject matter," because "they are 'calm', 'restful'; they offer 'solitude' and 'quiet'; they soothe."⁵ Without doubt, as Halle himself has concluded, this contemporary taste for tranquil landscapes is not unique to twentieth-century America. Similar artistic and cultural choices are also found in earlier periods and other nations. The phenomenon shows a common human longing, past and present, for contact with a pleasant natural environment.

For example, we know that the Augustan Roman poet Virgil invented an ideal pastoral scene of the countryside in contrast to the tumultuous Rome. In Richard Turner's book, *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy*, we see that Renaissance Italians also had a similar preference for landscapes of peace and quietude.⁶ In fact throughout the history of Western landscape painting, including sixteenth-century pastoral scenes and seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, there exists a broad sentiment for silence, peace and solitude. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, landscapes of this type became more popular and prevalent, which has been a continuing trend in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there has not been much concentrated study on this phenomenon. Past art theories tended to overlook it with concepts of imitation or idealization, classicism or the picturesque, or to cover it with a comprehensive romantic theory as in the case of the eighteenth- and nine

⁵S. Daniels and D. Cosgrove, "Introduction: the Iconography of Landscape," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, eds. D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1-10.

⁶David Halle, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 59-72. Of the 349 landscape pictures Halle sampled, only two are depicting a turbulent scene, all the rest present a tranquil and calm landscape. A Manhattan man commented on his Chinese garden scene: "It is so calm. That's what I like about it." A Manhattan woman talked about her landscape photographs: "They have a feeling of solitude, beauty, quiet, and peace." A Medford woman said about a beach scene with no human figures: "I like it because it's tranquil. No one bothers you."

⁶A. Richard Turner, *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), Chap. 10.

teenth-century painting. Such landscapes may be better defined and elucidated as images of contemplation, or landscapes of solitude.

This book attempts an interpretation of the depiction of solitude—the ideas of aloneness, seclusion, serenity, withdrawal, and retirement in Western landscape painting with a focus on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus it is a typological study of the particular theme and motif. It will explore the relationship between nature, ideology, psychology, history, culture, and modes of representation, in order to enrich the intellectual import of the genre of landscape painting as a whole and the landscape of solitude in particular. Hence the study will mainly take an iconographic and iconological approach.

Basic definition, limits, and aspects of solitude

There are many different aspects of solitude as it pertains to and manifests itself in landscape painting. In addition to being multifaceted, the meaning and boundaries of solitude have evolved. The very word "solitude" first appeared in Latin as *solitudo*, composed of the root *solus* (alone) and the suffix *tudo*. It was then used in Old French in the form of *solitude*, and borrowed into English in the early fourteenth century. Solitude by dictionary definition means: (1) loneliness, seclusion, and solitariness (of persons), the state of being or living alone; (2) loneliness (of places); remoteness from habitation, absence of life or disturbance; (3) a lonely, unfrequented, or uninhabited place.⁷ Synonymous with solitude are: isolation, seclusion, desolation, separateness, remoteness, emptiness, wilderness, retirement, withdrawal, retreat, detachment, hermitage, peace, and quiet. Yet, strict definitions and synonyms only provide a rough lens for approaching solitude in art. Through this lens we know to look for certain keywords and the absence of their opposites. In order to examine with finer lenses, it is necessary to make out the difference between "elements and principles *and* solitude" and "elements and principles *of* solitude." These definitions clarified, it is then necessary to examine the requirements of verbal solitude and visual solitude in each case, and the contribution of *physical isolation* and *spiritual isolation* towards their definitions.

"Elements and principles and solitude" constitute a preliminary model where solitude is a constant factor left un-tampered. The landscape of solitude may depict either a state of being unaccompanied, isolated, away from the social life or a solitary place that is out-of-the-way. At this point we are not so much concerned with that "state of being" as with these elements: un-accompaniment, isolation, and removed-ness, all of which may be best achieved by *physical isolation*, by being (1) remote, (2) enclosed,

⁷The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), vol. XV, p. 977.

(3) deserted, and (4) separated. In general the painted landscape is expected to imply tranquility with gentle springs or streams, peaceful mountains or skies, deserted fields, unmoving trees, placid foliage, serene architecture, and quiet figures. Visually, these objects evoke an undisturbed nature, a key element in landscapes of solitude, and the aforementioned *physical isolation*. Furthermore, terrifying spectacles and brilliant colors ought to be avoided for their noise and disturbances, unless a special situation of separateness or detachment is provided. All of these may be considered as fundamental pictorial motifs of the landscape of solitude.

A special consideration in defining the landscape of solitude is the traditional use of *staffage*, that is, figures in the landscape. Basically solitude is opposed to *several* or *many*, indicating a thing or a human being in physical isolation. As a rule "several" is undesirable, unless they are off or lost in the distance of the landscape and not represented conspicuously. As we may all have experienced, a quiet secluded landscape with a lone object or figure will readily arouse a feeling of solitude. With a proper setting and atmosphere, one lonely figure in the landscape is commonly an idiosyncratic indication of solitude. The ideal imagery will include a traveler, a laborer, a boatman, a shepherd, a monk, and a recluse. Two figures may still be acceptable if they could be viewed as one single unit or unrelated individuals. In addition, the use of *staffage*, as well as the inclusion of organic/inorganic objects, *must align* with the general mood of solitude.

As stated above, the theme of solitude has as its condition such composed elements as 'gentle springs,' 'peaceful mountains,' and 'serene architecture.' Verbally, these objects are closely associated with quietness and lack of outward activity. This verbal solitude is quintessential since we know that being unaccompanied is not necessarily solitude, especially when we are exposed to glamorous views or visions, noisy pleasures or loud emotions, or other external disturbances. The presence of verbal solitude will also enhance the visual solitude since gushing waters, windy skies, and other agitations may not affect solitude as a state of mind, but visual images of them may generate too much commotion for a landscape painting of solitude. Nevertheless, while peace, stillness, and silence are important elements of solitude, they are by no means of absolute necessity. According to Philip Koch, solitude may tolerate a certain level of noise and activity.⁸ In some circumstances it is possible that the insertion of certain disquieting elements may not disrupt the condition of solitude. Thus the limit of solitude is more inclusive than exclusive—the lack of certain definitive elements is less tolerable than the presence of impurity in such elements.

⁸Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, pp. 18-21.

"Elements and principles of solitude," on the other hand, examine the *quality of solitude* conveyed through a landscape painting, and gives it dimension. *Physical isolation* and its implications, both visual and verbal, are no longer the only condition for solitude. The situation of solitude could also be an intellectual state of mind, achieved through *spiritual isolation* and reflection.⁹ When a human being is disengaged from others, lost in thought, reflecting on something or meditating, he or she is free from outer disturbances and in solitude. It signifies freedom from worldly engagements, retiring into a private life of peace and quietude. The figures may appear small and negligible in the picture, but they often play a significant role in conveying the perception of solitude. In fact, the solitariness of the landscape is frequently enhanced or rendered more meaningful by a sensitive addition of human figures or animals. Both the painter and the viewer may identify themselves with the lonesome figure in a secluded scene of the landscape and either express or experience their feeling and thinking of solitude more intimately. The *staffage* must show coherence with the landscape, a sense of engagement in a spiritual journey that transpires apart from civilization. Although the figure(s) tends to stand diminutive against the landscape, solitude may be denied in a painting when the figure is engaged in the joys or pains of seeing, hearing, acting, etc. Thus their gestures should be kept simple and unemotional. In their asceticism, they are silently alone contemplating their seclusion, or the vastness and/or wilderness around them. If *staffage* is absent, the viewer must assume that dimension or presume the artist reserved it for himself (although the artist does this in both cases, which we will see in the later chapters). Whatever the case, the journey, emphatically individual, must aspire to transcend worldly concerns, using solitude as the vessel. Thus the landscape of solitude ought to be about wilderness, vacancy, desertion, enclosure, and separation from the busy world of civilization. In short, there should be a lack or absence of active human works, human habitation and human development. In this model, verbal solitude, as previously defined, should augment the integrity of the visual solitude. Moreover, it should render a type of primordial silence or tranquility most conducive to oneness with nature or with a spiritual being.

The painting *Landscape, Boys Fishing* by John Constable (1776-1837) is a good illustration of the use of *staffage* (Fig. 5).¹⁰ A peaceful village is half hidden among the woods in the back. In front of it is a sizeable pond of water, silent and still. Its surroundings and the water lock in the foreground take an aged, unchanging, permanent look, suggesting a timeless rural life away from the noise of the city. Some gentle breeze seems to have mildly agitated the trees, yet without upsetting the overall

⁹Zimmerman, *The Pleasures of Solitude* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1919), p. 3. See also Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 13-16.



Fig. 5 John Constable. *Landscape, Boys Fishing*, 1813. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 125.8 cm. National Trust, Fairhaven Collection, Anglesey Abbey, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

tranquility of the countryside. Occasional travelers faintly pass by in the far distance without disturbing the territory of the two boys fishing in the middle ground. The boys seem to care for nothing else but their own quiet "play." They are apparently lost in the solitary setting, in the time of the past. They may well fit into the artist's memory of bygone days. I am inclined to assume that the painting is no ordinary view of country life, but rather the artist's personal scene of nostalgia and contemplation. In a way, the artist has turned the corner of the countryside into a spiritual asylum, an enchantingly secluded home to delight in or admire.

Another important feature of the landscape of solitude is the use of ancient-looking images, primitive forms, and shapes, which seem to have been widely valued and repeatedly depicted by landscape painters. These qualities were commonly present

¹⁰There have been some doubts about the authenticity of the work due to the inconsistency in quality between oil sketches and the painting. However, careful examination also reveals that the surviving preparatory oil sketches correspond closely with various finished parts of the painting, such as the lock gates and the elm trees. This and the fact that Constable was a unique painter of the Stour Valley lead Michael Rosenthal and some others think that the painting is genuine. See Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: the Painter and His Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 63.