



# Framing the View

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A landscape picture is familiarly an image of the outside world adorning the walls of our indoor world. Those whose rooms do not allow window views of rural distances can acquire printed or photographic versions to supply what is missing; arguably, the more we live in towns, the higher the value of such artificial views of what we can no longer see through our windows. As one English writer put it, surveying the popularity of landscape paintings in the late eighteenth century

the draughtsman was driven into the recesses of the mountains, for the subjects of his pencil. From thence he brought home scenes, not only suitable to his art, as being more capable of receiving its higher touches, than less broken scenery

but at the same time, such as were acceptable to his customers; as forming an agreeable contrast with the ordinary scenery in the environs of cities—indeed, at all times, and every where, one great end of Landscape painting is to bring distant scenery—and such more particularly as it is wild and not easily accessible—under the eye, in a cultivated country, and an embellished site: and not to expose itself, by a faint imitation of the views which are seen from the windows of the room, for which the representations are intended as furniture.<sup>1</sup>

One framed landscape replaces another, the simulacrum substitutes for the real, while both may make us aware of the degree to which we feel we have become distanced from 'nature'. In our domestic interiors we become increasingly conscious of 'outside' and 'inside', of separate worlds. The open window to that outside world, beyond the towns, gives us not only, if we are lucky, a glimpse of countryside—a section of garden, orchards, fields, woodland, hills—it also gives us light and fresh air. The associations between access in our domestic lives to these vital natural resources and the aesthetic benefits of a good view give landscape imagery a special status. You cannot paint or photograph light and fresh air, but you can represent the forms spontaneously brightened and invigorated by those essential things: the gleam of sunlight on a river or the bright reticulations of shadow and light through leaves and branches, trees bending in the breeze that stirs the lake

surface into ripples. Immaterial light and air, which are precious commodities in our domestic-interior lives, are, as it were, metonymically represented in landscape pictures by the material forms they touch, illuminate and vivify. The wonderfully vivid freshness communicated in Ansel Adams's *Tenaya Creek* photograph [3] is a good example.

The framing of views of the natural world, on painted canvas and photographic prints, or through viewfinders, windows, doorways and arches, is the subject of this chapter. I will be looking at a range of pictures from very different periods and traditions, with the intention of examining the psychological impressions made when landscape is mediated by an interior, where that interior intrudes into the picture to define the boundaries of the chosen scene or scenes. The presence of an interior determines our relationship with that landscape, which is so often inflected by our sense of the duality 'indoors' and 'outdoors'

This issue is exemplified in complicated ways in the painting by Antonello da Messina (c.1430-79), *St Jerome in his Study* [57]. The outside world illuminates the interior through several apertures: the three high windows bringing light into the vaulted upper space; the two or three lower windows giving views of the hilly landscape; and the foreground archway through which we see all this. Thus, through an architectural frame, shaped like an altarpiece painting, we penetrate into an interior until we reach more recessed frames that draw us again into the outside world.

The painting is a virtuoso exercise in perspective, scrupulously organizing the lines of the meticulously detailed floor tiling, the delicate colonnade on the right, the raised study area in the centre. A vertical line passes down from the centre of the crown of the archway, more or less through the column bisecting the central window, passing through Jerome's open book down to the central vertical line of the tiling, from either side of which the bands of tile gradually fan out to reinforce the one-point perspectival design. Everything is meticulously parallel to the picture plane: archway, study spaces, rear wall, Jerome himself in his side-on position, the peacock, partridge and half-sketched cat. Only the lion, conspicuously, breaks the pattern.

Much the same compositional geometry continues in the landscape beyond, through the left-hand window. River, rowing boat, the sunlit walls of the town or monastery, and adjacent enclosed garden, and the road passing in front of these all run parallel to the picture plane and are cut by diagonals echoing the line of perspective that started at the foreground archway: the slant of the oar, the road leading up towards the hills. Hardly anything in the painting is allowed to disturb this austere geometry, except the folds, sweeps, and more rounded contours of Jerome's figure and clothing—a disturbance formally designed to arrest attention on the subject of the painting. That relief from the rectilinear principle is echoed in the landscape's rolling, rounded



**57 Antonello da Messina**  
*St Jerome in his Study*,  
c.1474

forms, glimpsed through those two windows. Interestingly, both windows are divided: the large left-hand window with its mullion and transom grid breaks up the landscape into four framed views, and the right-hand window is interrupted by the columns. In the left window the horizontal division neatly separates the green, comfortable, populated river landscape from what looks like barren hill country above.

The view of the outside in this painting, the landscape (such as it is) with its looser, rounder contours, is subordinated to the discipline of the interior which itself is a projection of the orderly mind of the scholar saint who is the chief focus. Framing predominates as a series of frames, explored as the eye moves into the picture through successive openings, past the figure of the saint, to right and left, drawn towards the muted sources of light from the rear. In all of this, the interior is clearly distinguished from the exterior: against this ruled complex of spaces, landscape functions distantly as the relatively unruly 'outside' that will not disturb the composure of Jerome's study. The mind is in full control.

By contrast, consider the framing strategies and the outside-inside duality in Christoffer Eckersberg's (1783-1853) *A Pergola* [58]. Eckersberg, a Danish painter, was part of the artistic circle around the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1768/70-1844) in Rome in the second decade of the nineteenth century and produced a number of Italian landscapes in this period. In *A Pergola*, 'inside' and 'outside' are confused, and indeed that confusion may well be the experience the painter is aiming to represent. The viewer's position is presumably within a walled garden, where the sunlight filters through the leafy mesh of the pergola, giving a sensation of shade that contrasts with the intense heat sensed in the open landscape beyond. The sunlight through the pergola is softened and mellowed so that it harmonizes with the pale terracotta of the wall. As one moves from one space to another in the picture, there is a consistent interplay between the natural and the cultivated, the inside and the outside, the relaxed and the formal, the free and the trained. As in da Messina's painting [57], the viewer is positioned dead centre and the principal architectural features are parallel to the picture plane, starting with the pergola uprights and cross beams, then the high wall and arch, beyond that to the low wall and sarcophagus (if that is what it is), and then out to the long flank of the sun-baked farm building in the distance. The perspective lines on pavement and pergola are carefully calculated and the principal frame of the archway is emphatic and hard edged. One frame opens on another and, unlike the da Messina painting, natural forms live in harmony with the architecture; a gentler version of the exterior countryside flourishes under a benign, relaxed rule within the confines of the enclosed garden.

For northern Europeans especially, there is a fascination with the relaxing of sharp distinctions between inside and outside, landscape and domestic interior. So much of the northerner's life is passed inside buildings that it differs a great deal from the experience of the Mediterranean where inside and outside interpenetrate more easily. Such considerations might help to explain why landscape art seems originally to have been a northern European initiative.



The motif of the window view, sometimes including a gazing figure, has been associated with specifically northern European Romantic preoccupations, the longing to escape confinement, the inducement to liberate the imagination to explore the vast regions of light. The motif, as one critic has put it, 'brings the confinement of an interior into the most immediate contrast with the immensity of space outside—the window is like a threshold, and at the same time a barrier'<sup>2</sup> The effect of a window frame around a landscape is to accentuate the sense of distance, cultural as well as visual, which that outside world acquires. Novalis (the pseudonym for the German Romantic von Hardenburg (1772–1801)) wrote, 'Everything at a distance turns into poetry: distant mountains, distant people, distant events; all become romantic.' Such distancing and framing by an interior can glamorize even the most unassuming kinds of landscape.

Take the example (from the period identified with this Romantic fascination for the motif) of the German painter Friedrich Wasmann's



(1805–1886) *View from a Window* [59]. The frame is rendered as drab, daubed bands of dark and lighter brown with just enough detail on the left to suggest an opened casement, the angled top and bottom lines of which guide the eye out into the landscape, the base of the casement frame running parallel to the line of the road. Once beyond the rectangle of the window there are no strict horizontals or verticals. Instead this is a composition of dramatically steep diagonals and restless, rolling contours. The brushwork which was dragged along in straight bands to represent the frame now loosens up and slithers freely in defining the forms and rimming them with the bright, low sunlight. The colouring of the further landscape is almost preternaturally rich and romantic in its glowing primrose sky and lapis lazuli sea of hills, heightened by the dull umbers of the interior of the viewing room. Inside throws the outside into brighter relief.

The relationship between domestic interior and romantic landscape is echoed in the centrally pictured cottage on the foreground slope. If *we* have a sumptuous view, what must the uninterrupted view be like from the far side of the cottage? What is life like when you are *part* of such a landscape? The lack of any topographical information in the painting's title enhances its Romantic values, its dreamlike aura. In this respect it differs from the detailed, expansive view of the Bay of Naples and Vesuvius taken from a window in the town of Quisisana [60] by Norwegian painter Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857). The window frame is less intrusive in this composition, though stressed in the title. Through the window and over the rooftops of the neighbouring houses, we are given a scale by which to take the



60 Johan Christian Dahl

*View from a Window at  
Quisisana, 1820*

measure of the giant cone of Vesuvius, smouldering in the late afternoon light. The blue remoteness of the volcano is enhanced by the contrast with the neat symmetry of the frame and the glimpse of trim shutters on the left.

Dahl's painting is more a tourist's record of a celebrated landscape than a glimpse of Romantic possibilities. This is another implication of the window view: it authenticates the landscape. A picture frame is an ornamental addition to a completed painting of any kind, but the inclusion of a window frame border in the total painting enhances the sense that this is a real view—a visual anecdote, as it were—an authentic part of one's experience *here*. The window frame serves another purpose. Its boundaries help to limit the lateral stretch of the landscape, which has a panoramic sweep. Both the high viewpoint and the physical topography of the area deprive the viewer of natural borders: the eye from, say, a hilltop at this level could sweep uninterruptedly to left and right in this vast, continuous landscape, but here the window's useful boundaries provide a ready-made frame. The window is parallel to the picture plane, and we must be no more than a metre away from the sill. Any further forward and we would be turning our head left and right as the landscape increasingly assumed a panoramic curve. As it is, at a little distance from the window, this becomes one view, 'front on'—the inclusion of the frame in the painting is telling us just that. The

convenience for the painter is considerable. This view of a real Neapolitan scene belongs in the room where this particular window is; once painted, it becomes portable, and the same view can adorn a room anywhere else in the world.

Books of advice to painters frequently stressed the desirability of selecting a view that could be taken in without turning the head. The seascape painter Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–89) endorsed this in this a letter of c.1765:

Il faut prendre, pour sujet de votre dessin ou de votre tableau, ce que le même coup d'oeil peut embrasser, sans remuer ni tourner la tête; car, chaque fois qu'on tourne pour voir un objet qu'on n'apercevait pas, ce sont tout autant de tableaux nouveaux qui demanderaient le changement de la forme des objets, celui de leurs plans, et par consequent celui de la perspective.<sup>3</sup>

The rigid restriction to the single glance, so conveniently enforced by the window frame, has interesting implications for landscape representation. Vernet argues that the consequences of disregarding his advice are not simply that the principal focus of a composition would have to be awkwardly expanded in order to include whatever visual information a slight turn of the head would add, but that the principal view would change its value—a value dependent on the fixed, limited perspective. Thus, to return to Dahl's *View*, if the painter had moved closer to the window the view would have included (as one looked from left to right) more of, respectively, the Bay of Naples and the hinterland, as well as more of the foreground below. It would cease to be 'a view', perhaps; it would be unpicturable, unless one devised a panoramic

61 Eric Ravilious

*Train Landscape*, 1940

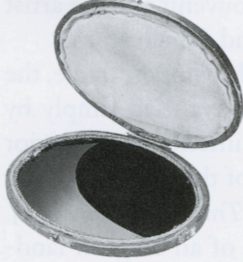


representation. As it is, this becomes a portable souvenir and the artist is relieved of further responsibility for selection and demarcation.

Had Dahl and Wasmann retired further from the window frame, the landscape would have been modified in other ways than simply by shrinkage of extent. The relationship between interior and exterior would have become more insistently the subject of the picture. This is the case in Eric Ravilious's (1903–42) watercolour *Train Landscape* [61]. This perplexing scene gives three framed views of an English landscape from within a third-class railway compartment. It is, of course, one continuous landscape outside, divided up by the carriage window frames into a triptych. The landscape itself is unremarkable except for a white horse. Cultivated fields occupy the foreground, and a prehistoric relic marks the open, ancient downland. This homely view of a patiently enduring English landscape no doubt had a particular poignancy at the time it was painted (the second year of World War II). All this is seen from within the trim, modern world of the train interior. The two worlds are not quite as antithetical as one might suppose: the design and, to some extent, the texture of the carriage cloth chime with the field patterns outside. The effigy of the old animal mode of transport is ironically framed from within the new machine mode. As in the Messina painting of Jerome in his study [57], the loose, free lines of the distant landscape are interrupted, controlled into smaller units by the restricted perspective from the fussy, airless compartment interior. We are sealed off from that outside world in our comfortable, upholstered, symmetrically organized interior. The only window that could be opened is obtrusively closed, as the full length of the leather release belt demonstrates. The tabs on the blinds, intruding into the tops of the frames, are easily reached if one wanted to obliterate that outside world altogether.

What is particularly unsettling about this picture is that there is no suggestion of any movement that would normally have the effect of blurring the contours of the exterior world. We are now very used to seeing landscape move rapidly past us through the window frames of train compartments or cars, so that the frame hardly controls a stable composition as it does through a house window. But the car, train or carriage passenger can enjoy a linked sequence of landscapes from that point of view. We imagine ourselves, by an odd transference, as seated in a stationary interior with the world rushing past outside for our amusement, as at the exhibition of a moving panorama when the spectator is in fact stationary and watching a giant continuous landscape or cityscape scroll by.

The perception in such circumstances of landscape scenery as a spectacle, a commercial amenity, becomes a kind of habit. So it was for the eighteenth-century Picturesque tourists as they travelled in their carriages through England's Lake District, armed with their Claude glasses [62]:



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A Claude glass

A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye. They are like the visions of the imagination; or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Forms, and colours, in brightest array, fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should give any price to fix, and appropriate the scene.<sup>4</sup>

The traveller here, William Gilpin, has two frames to mediate his landscapes: the carriage window and his Claude glass. He is not looking out of the carriage window but into the framed mirror reflection of what the window offers to his view. So he sees the world outside as 'a succession of pictures', waiting to be fixed and appropriated; in other words, the world outside has already been reduced to a frameable possession. Gilpin's pictorial processing of the experience of natural scenery, extravagantly artificial as it might seem, is a version of the way many of us continue to perceive landscape, as our experience of it is increasingly mediated by frames of one kind or another: the window, the camera viewfinder, the television set, the cinema screen.

Gilpin used the Claude glass as a kind of portable frame with additional optical advantages. The glass was a convenient, miniaturized version of the larger convex studio mirror sometimes used by painters. Encased in a wallet, the convex glass (oval, circular or rectangular) admitted into the frame a fair expanse of landscape, but the reflected image was, of course, condensed and warped, so that lateral verticals in the original scene appeared slightly bowed in the sides of the mirror. The modern wide-angle camera lens can give the same effect. Through this device nature could be viewed instantly, accommodated in a frame; sometimes in both an internal as well as an external frame. If the artist found the right viewpoint, he or she might be able to use foreground trees or the side of a building to act as framing side screens, through which the eye could wander to the middle and far distance. The convexity could give a slight inward curve to these foreground verticals so that, in seeming to lean in and enclose the central view, they acted as convenient natural coulisses to supplement the mirror's own frame.

Tourists equipped with Claude glasses could pass through countryside 'taking pictures' in the way the modern tourist does with a camera, and return home with a series of 'fixed' and 'appropriated' landscape pictures mediated through frame and viewfinder. This is what the tourists are doing in Paul Sandby's (1730/1–1809) painting *Roslin Castle, Midlothian* [63]. Sandby depicts the picturing activity of gentlefolk as they use the box *camera obscura* to take pictures of the peasant woman and child on the bridge, with perhaps the shepherd and flock in the background. For these amateur artists, the landscape is processed, by lens and mirror, to throw on to the rectangular ground-glass surface an image that one of the ladies is tracing.

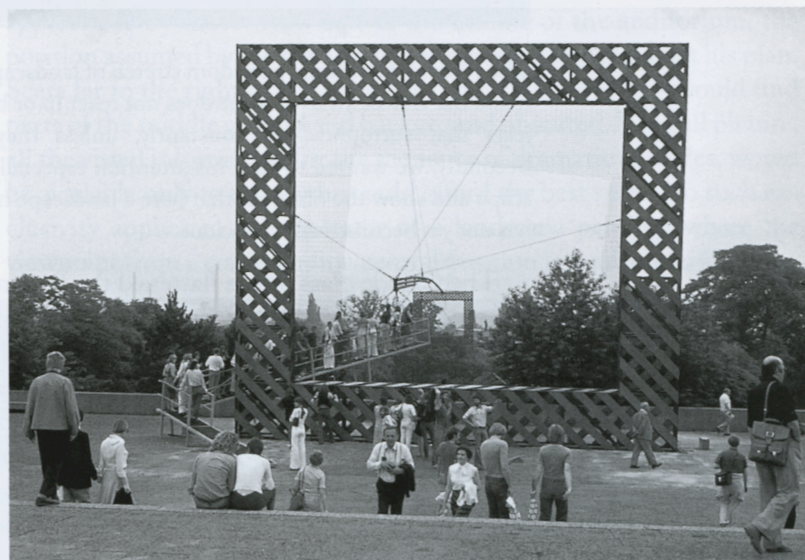
63 Paul Sandby

Roslin Castle, Midlothian,  
c. 1780



64 Haus-Rucker-Co

Rahmenbau, 1977



What the eighteenth-century gentry enjoyed as a sophisticated connoisseur activity has become fairly habitual for the modern tourist. The 1977 *documenta 6* exhibition in Kassel, Germany featured a gigantic installation, the *Rahmenbau* [64], consisting of two frames erected at *Schöne Aussicht* (beautiful view), a terrace overlooking a park and valley. The frames, according to one description, gave shockingly different views: 'A green landscape viewed through the large frame as a wide valley was transformed by the small frame into urban sprawl dominated by chimneys.'<sup>5</sup> The same writer quotes one of the artists involved in the exhibit, Laurids Ortner, as commenting on the habit of framing:



The *Rahmenbau* frames a random stretch of landscape. Our concern is first, to make the viewer aware that he does not react to or become aware of daily objects that surround him constantly, unless they are specially 'framed'. Secondly, we wanted to turn his attention especially toward the urban landscape and show the observer that here a landscape has developed of which he has not yet become fully conscious.

The Claude glass image flattened the features in a landscape of any depth, much as binoculars do, so that, as Gilpin observed, they look 'something like the scenes of a playhouse, retiring behind each other'.<sup>6</sup> This brings us to consider another kind of framing, the proscenium arch. As with the window views, the theatre audience (after the introduction in the early nineteenth century of gas lighting) gazed from within a darkened room through the proscenium frame into a brightly lit world organized to draw the eye into its middle and upstage areas, much as the landscape artist would direct the passage of the spectator's eye. This is evident in the seventeenth-century set design, by an unknown Italian artist, *Landscape with Rustic Houses and Waterfall* [65]. The historian of stage design, Donald Oenslager, in describing this sketch, suggests the analogy with the little window-view landscapes in Renaissance painting, such as those we have seen in da Messina's painting:

The artist tried to create order out of many unrelated elements by aligning his wings in perspective on the stage floor. Thus he incorporated many locales in one scene—a rustic house, a rocky forest, a waterfall, a fence with garden gate, a *tempietta*, and, atop the opposite precipice, a villa. The composite scene debouched into an open landscape with a fortified hilltown above a river

receding in the distance, quite reminiscent of those charming views seen through the windows of Renaissance paintings.<sup>7</sup>

This eclectic landscape is the setting for an unknown pastoral play, according to Oenslager: 'this composite scene served the fluid action of pastoral plays such as Tasso's *Aminta* and Guarini's *Pastor Fido*' The scene is an *omnium gatherum* of landscape motifs. The downstage wings, emerging from the proscenium sides, reinforce the lateral framing of the theatre structure with, on the right, a darkened cliff face and overhanging tree, bending inwards as would be the desired effect in a Claude glass view, and on the left, rustic houses built against and rising from the cliff, following the vertical of the slender tree next to them. The rest of the set is organized on strong intersecting diagonals. Along the ground on the right a clearly visible line marks out the basic structural plan. The perspective line is carried along these paths and continued in the background by the zigzagging river.

Such a strongly perspectival set design, if carried out, would be most appreciated by those with seats in the middle of the auditorium, the position assumed by the particular scenographer as he laid out his plan. Seats far to the right or left of centre—the cheaper seats—would find parts of the middle ground and background obscured. The full picture, all the visual information for the sequence of dramatic episodes, would be available only to those who could afford the best seats. No such exclusivity applies to the spectator of a landscape painting where the viewpoint from a commanding central position is available to anyone.

**66 Nicolas Poussin**

*Orpheus and Eurydice*,  
c.1650



Whether such traditions of stage design influenced the seventeenth-century Roman landscape painters—Claude and the Poussins in particular—or whether the painters influenced the scenographers is hard to determine. But the advantage of a framed design of this kind was unarguably felt by both in giving a disciplined structure to a landscape scene. One critic has drawn attention to specific theatrical correspondences in a painting by Nicolas Poussin, *Orpheus and Eurydice* [66], arguing that no other landscape painting by Poussin so clearly resembles a theatre stage:

The spectator is just the right distance away and has the central viewpoint usually enjoyed from the best seat in the auditorium. The resemblance to a stage is such that the middleground and background could almost be envisaged as a two-dimensional backdrop intended to produce a three-dimensional effect: the castle could be a text-book example of how to render volume on a flat surface. This trick endows the figures in the foreground with a kind of physical freedom, a plasticity that convinces by contrast with the 'painted picture' look of the background.<sup>8</sup>

The scene of *Orpheus and Eurydice* is played out downstage against a painted backdrop. It is not only the middle ground and background that suggest two-dimensional stage scenery. Poussin has also organized his repoussoir trees as stage wings. When one adds the dark clouds over the top of the picture and the strong shadow running all along its base, we are presented with another version of the interior framing technique. This intensifies the strong bright light in which the dramatic action is played out, and corresponds to the ideal sought by stage lighting.

The stage designer is constructing a landscape of two-dimensional trees, castles, and hills within a three-dimensional framed space. Landscape painters sometimes used stage models in constructing their imaginary landscapes, figuratively and literally (Philippe Jacques de Louterbourg (1740–1812) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88), for example). Views of landscape through a window or viewfinder, captured in a Claude glass or organized as a stage set, suggest how persistent is the habit of framing a view of the natural world, of seeing it in rectangular sections. I want to close this review of some of the ideas and practices of framing the landscape with two examples of the play between the real and the artificial which is stimulated by the habit of framing.

The playhouse, the window frame and the ideally proportioned rectangular view are brought together in one formerly celebrated natural site in England's Lake District. Near Grasmere, on the Rydal Hall estate, are two waterfalls of modest size. The smaller of the two, Lower Rydal Fall [67], is a drop of about 20 feet. The water falls from a narrow rim in a thickly wooded area, is divided in its fall by a large protruding rock, and tumbles into a wider pool, overhung with trees, before veering to the left into a smaller channel and out of sight. On



**67 Joseph Wright of Derby**  
*Rydal Lower Fall, 1795*

**68 Anon**  
Rydal Falls from the  
Summerhouse



the poolside bank, directly opposite the falls was (and still is) a small seventeenth-century stone hut, a summerhouse [68], the entrance to which was gained by a path to its rear, so designed that as the visitor approached the falls and listened to the noise of the water growing louder, his view was blocked by the little hut. Once inside, and when the door had been closed, the shutters on the large window facing the pool were thrown back and there, perfectly framed, was a view of the tree-shaded falls, the pool in the foreground, and above, in the background, a glimpse of the little rustic stone bridge crossing the upper stream.

Whatever the original purpose of the little hut, by the later eighteenth century it had become an ideal viewing chamber. The dark interior and the large window threw into strong picturesque relief this little landscape, ideally proportioned to its frame. William Mason, the poet and biographer of Thomas Gray (1716–71), noted with satisfaction the sense of scale:

Here Nature has performed every thing in little that she usually executes on her largest scale; and on that account, like the miniature painter, seems to have finished every part of it in a studied manner; not a little fragment of rock thrown into the bason, not a single stem of brushwood that starts from its craggy sides but has its picturesque meaning, and the little central stream dashing down a cleft of the darkest-coloured stone, produces an effect of light and shadow beautiful beyond description. This little theatrical scene might be painted as large as the original, on a canvas not bigger than those which are usually dropped in the Opera-house.<sup>9</sup>

Nature had constructed her landscape in such a way as to ensure its value as an aesthetic commodity. It hardly needed any artistic modification. The principal motifs were sufficiently concentrated in the composition to make distortions of the Claude glass unnecessary. All that was needed was to put a frame around the living scene; and that is, in effect, what the summer-house offered. The scene was thereby processed and was poised in status between natural landscape and artefact: a 'living picture'

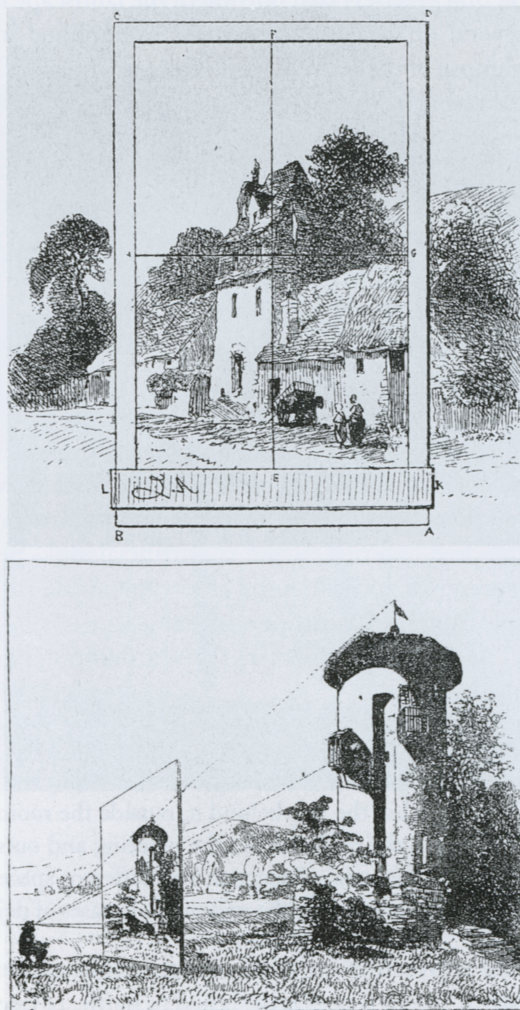
The window view, as we noticed earlier, in the *View* of the Bay of Naples [60], helps to determine the scope and boundaries of a potentially limitless landscape. The frame determines the single glance that Vernet and others insisted was so important to the selection of landscape subject. One can enlarge or contract the view slightly by moving towards or back from the window. Minute attention to calculations of the chosen view featured in many treatises on perspective. One such, which also has some interesting advice on framing the view, was Arnaud Cassagne's *Traité Pratique de Perspective* (1873): 'The assemblage of objects destined to form a picture should be easily embraced at a glance.'<sup>10</sup> This meant that the artist had to choose very carefully the proper distance to take up from the object to be represented. Too near and the

artist would have to turn the head from left to right to catch the extremities of the chosen view, too far and the intervening air would give too vague a form to the objects of study. The best distance 'should be *at least equal to twice the total base of the subject*'<sup>11</sup> The Rydal viewing chamber conforms very closely to these stipulations on distance and the single glance; furthermore, in providing a frame that prevents any lateral stretching of the view, it corresponds to another important recommendation by Cassagne:

To judge the distance properly in drawing from nature, the artist will derive great assistance from the use of a small frame, of wood or cardboard, divided in the middle by a very fine thread or horse-hair, which divides the space into four equal parts and at the same time indicates the centre.<sup>12</sup>

The illustration of this technique imposes a grid over the village scene [69] (much as the left-hand window frame in Messina's *Jerome* [57])

69 Cassagne  
Two diagrams, 1873



was organized by the intersecting vertical and horizontal bars), focusing the chosen subject, preparing it to become a painting. The other illustration, the tower in the landscape, interposes a huge two-dimensional representation between artist and subject in order to demonstrate the point about the proper distance. In somewhat surreal fashion it also provokes questions about the relationship between copy and original; this brings us to René Magritte's (1898–1967) *La Condition Humaine* [70].

It is likely that Magritte knew Cassagne's diagrams and that the idea in several of Magritte's paintings, where a canvas intervenes between the viewer and the landscape which is the subject of the canvas, was suggested by these.<sup>13</sup> In this teasing version of the relationship between nature and artifice, where the manipulative, processing implications of the frame are concerned, the window and curtains frame a landscape which is partially obscured by an easel-mounted canvas depicting precisely that portion of the landscape it blocks from view. Like several of the landscape views exemplified in this chapter, this is a glimpse of the outside world from an interior. The ruled lines and drab colouring of the interior, including the apparatus of easel and canvas, enhance the softened, organic forms and iridescence of the exterior scene. But that interior/exterior play is complicated by the further element of the canvas painting. In a reversal of the usual distinctions, the real landscape is framed (by the window), and the painted landscape is not. But that distinction between the real and the painted collapses. Both landscapes are painted, of course: Magritte has made no distinction between his manifestly painterly handling of what one can see of the 'real' landscape and the painterly handling of its canvas representation. The two landscapes are consistent and continuous with each other in technique as well as in their positional relationship. So can one talk of *two* landscapes here? Can one sustain the usual hierarchical distinctions between the 'real' one and the 'artificial' one, between 'exterior' and 'interior', when the artificial looks just as real as the scene it represents, and when the landscape inside the room is indistinguishable from the landscape outside?

Magritte's own remarks on the painting raise explicitly the issue of inside/outside:

In front of a window seen from inside a room, I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape. This simultaneous existence in two different spaces is like living simultaneously in the past and in the present, as in cases of *deja vu*.<sup>14</sup>

The representation of the simultaneous existence of the landscape in two different spaces is designed to baffle, to deconstruct, those familiar

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**70 René Magritte**  
*La Condition Humaine*, 1933

distinctions and orientations on which landscape views from interiors depend, as this chapter has shown. Landscape is supposed to be that which lies outside our familiar domestic living spaces—as in the distinction between Jerome's study area and the rolling hill scenery glimpsed through his windows. Landscape is conventionally that which we bring into our interiors in the form of copies only—framed pictures. This distinction generates, or is produced by, a range of associated distinctions which we take for granted in considering landscape in art: such as, domestic versus wild, art versus nature, manufactured versus organic, copy versus original. Magritte's picture, with its teasing reflexivity, deliberately subverts these habits of perception: 'given my desire to make the most ordinary objects shock if at all possible, I obviously had to upset the order in which one generally places them'<sup>15</sup> The shock of defamiliarization, which was crucial to the Surrealist venture, lies less in the objects represented than in the disposition of those objects in entirely new relationships, in their recontextualizing. Magritte's remarks on *déjà vu* as the momentary experience of living simultaneously in the past and the present is another example of such dislocation and the resultant collapse of binary opposites. Thus, in *La Condition Humaine*, Magritte disturbs a whole tradition of cultural conventions.

Looked at from another point of view, the painting may be seen as less subversive than it is parodic of what Magritte regards as the bourgeois-picturesque valuation of landscape and its representation in art. To what extent has that valuation prioritized the artificial over the real and accepted the former as the landscape of real, palpable value, not only in commodity terms? Have we come to recognize the aesthetic merits of landscape only when it can be accommodated in a frame of some sort? The often-remarked use of the same word, 'landscape', to designate both a stretch of countryside and an artistic representation of that countryside suggests that an elision of a conceptual kind has taken place.

A familiar way of describing realism in art and literature is to invoke the analogy of the mirror or the window. The realist writer supposedly offers the reader a view of life through a wholly transparent window pane, without distortion, without manipulative mediation. But what has happened to the window view in *La Condition Humaine*? Our view of the real world outside is blocked by the painting, and yet it is not blocked because the painting does what the Realist agenda requires: it reproduces all that the eye could see were the canvas to be removed. We can virtually ignore the fact that it is a canvas and treat it as part of the window. Viewed thus, the right edge of the easel painting, with its pinheads securing the bare canvas to the stretch frame, becomes just a white vertical strip unaccountably taped on to the window pane, and the portion of easel and clamp floating in the blue sky might be a typical Surrealist intrusion of something alien.

Art here prevents us from seeing nature: it physically impedes our view of what the window allows us to glimpse. This is Magritte's literalizing of a cultural change in our perception of landscape. Or is 'nature' simply an idea we need to construct for that which is *beyond* the painted, framed object? Perhaps the 'original' has in some respects never been other than a construction, a fabric of our perceptions determined by cultural conventions and changing human needs. To what extent does the formal framing of a view of the natural world—the window view of Romanticism as much as the framed, painted landscape—not just enhance but produce the sense that there is such a thing as unframed landscape? Is that sense of a real, wild landscape beyond the frame just as much an illusion as the framed, painted view of it? And *is that* unanswerable question, graphically posed in Magritte's painting, what he means when he entitles it 'The Human Condition'?

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