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José María Velasco

VELASCO's landscapes dominate painting in Mexico in the last decades of the nineteenth century. A quality of freshness and naturalism in his paintings, and the careful observation and light handling of foreground detail, have suggested comparison with Corot, the Barbizon school, and, most aptly, with early Pissarro, but other features in his work distance him considerably from these artists. Most obvious of these was his love of the grand panorama, which involved an attitude to the landscape, and to nature, quite different from that of most Europeans of the time. For them, nature was to be 'truly seen in all its variety, its freshness',¹ free of the tropes of classicism or Romanticism, the modest motif painted on the spot: trees, farmyard, village street, cornfield, river bank. Velasco had to find a means of representing a landscape so much vaster than Europe, and uncontainable within its contrasting modes of pastoral and untamed. He did so by drawing on two distinct earlier traditions of representing landscape, both of European origin, and his genius lay in adapting them to purely Mexican conditions [Pls 4.1-7, 9, 13, 14, 16].

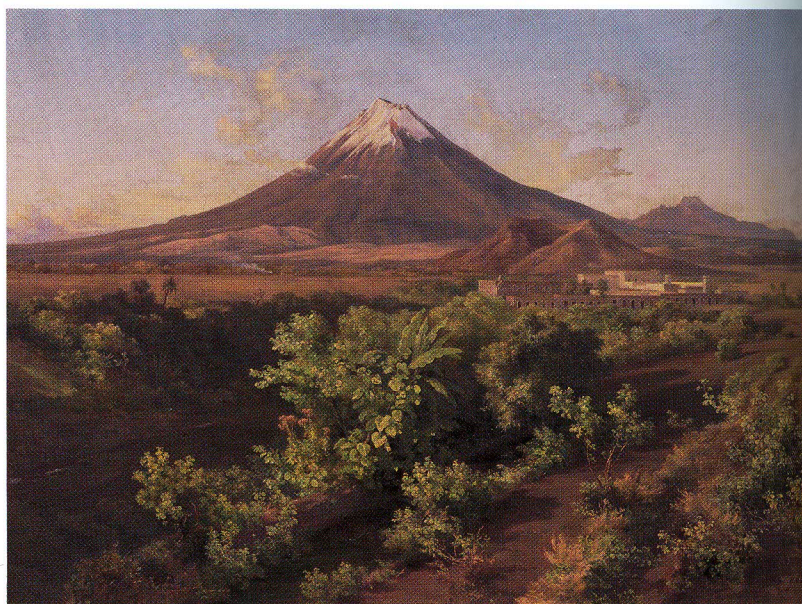
These traditions were the classical landscape, originally created in the seventeenth century by Claude and Poussin, and the topographical scene of the European traveller-artists, which was infused (as was argued in chapter 3: II) with picturesque and Romantic attitudes. Each of these traditions was conditioned by a specifically European dialectic between nature and civilization, but was part of Velasco's formation as an artist. The classical landscape was brought to Mexico by the Italian artist Eugenio Landesio, who had

4.1 Detail of Pl. 4.5.



4.2 José María Velasco, *Mexican Landscape, Pico de Orizaba*, 1876, oil on canvas, 30.5×45 cm., Národní Muzeum, Prague.

4.3 José María Velasco, *Mexican Landscape with Cone of a Volcano*, 1887, oil on canvas, 76.6×107.8 cm., Národní Muzeum, Prague.



4.4 José María Velasco, *The Valley of Mexico*, 1899, oil on canvas, 15.2×23 cm., Národní Muzeum, Prague.



4.5 José María Velasco, *The Valley of Mexico from the Heights of Tacubaya*, 1894, oil on canvas, 47×62.3 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

4.6 José María Velasco, *Hacienda of Chimalpa*, 1893, oil on canvas, 104×159 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

trained in Rome and was imported in 1855 to teach landscape painting at the Academy of San Carlos. It depicted a nature that was, essentially, ideal, while the traveller-artists had started from the recording of a specific scene, and the scientific observation of flora and fauna – or alternatively, fuelled by the picturesque taste of Europe, had responded with awe to jungle and volcano. Velasco naturalized, rather than romanticized, the dramatic objects of this landscape; he painted rocks, tropical vegetation, volcanos, the massive candelabra cactus, individually, or combined with the sweeping vista. But his great subject was the Valley of Mexico itself, which lies some 7,000 feet up in the central highlands, ringed by volcanoes, above which tower the twin peaks of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl. Site of the capital city, it was the heart of the Aztec empire, and before that of the Toltec and Teotihuacán civilizations.





4.7 José María Velasco, *The Valley of Mexico*, 1875, oil on canvas, 35×48.8 cm., Národní Muzeum, Prague.



4.9 (facing page top) José María Velasco, *View of the Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Santa Isabel*, 1877, oil on canvas, 160.5×229.7 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

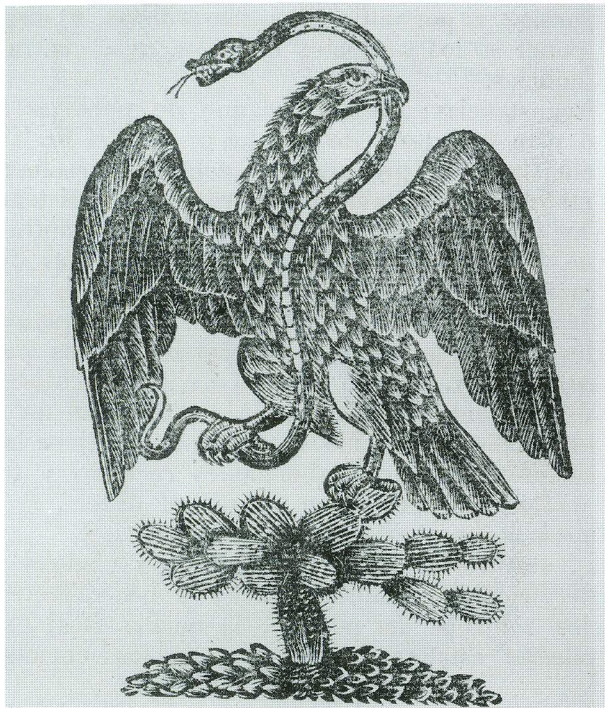
4.8 Eugenio Landasio, *The Valley of Mexico*, n.d., oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).



If we compare Velasco's *Valley of Mexico* of 1875 with his teacher Landesio's version of the same subject [Pls 4.7,8], it is possible to see how far Velasco used and transformed the structures of the classical landscape. Although considerably modified, the Claudian landscape was still the basis of Landesio's Mexican scenes. Claude had painted an ideal nature; although he sketched from life in the Roman Campagna, the whole picture was built up in the studio according to unvarying compositional principles. Framed by clumps of trees or a hill, the vistas from foreground to horizon were articulated in alternating bands of dark and light, set at slight angles to mask the transition from one to the next, often with a river winding through to help draw the eye into the distance [Pl. 4.10]. Arcadian nymphs and shepherds, or figures from classical mythology, introduced a poetic element and emphasized the ideal character of the scene, and the whole represented an image of a unified and ideal nature at harmony with man. The basic structure, and the harmonious display of the prospect, are still present in Landesio, although his figures suggest an actual rather than mythological or historical

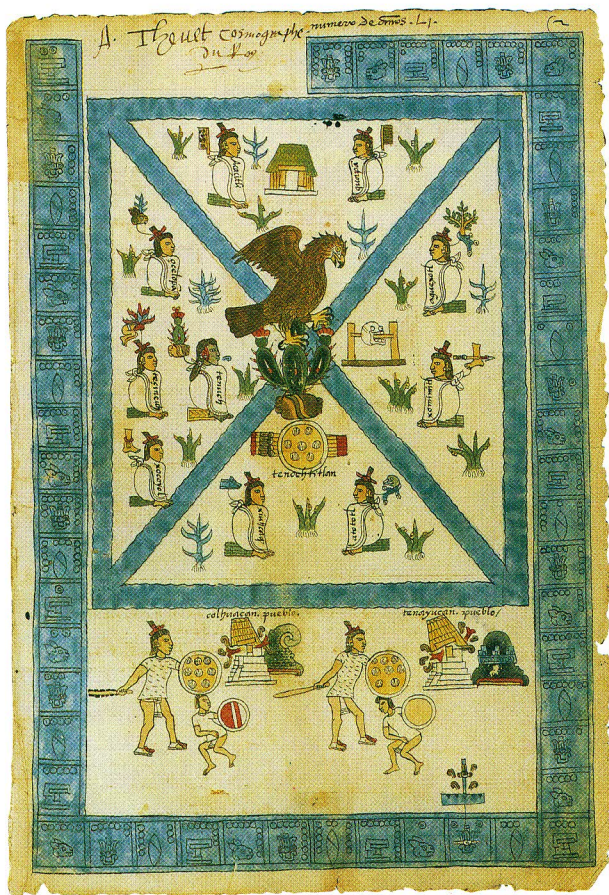
4.10 Claude Lorraine, *The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (The Mill)*, 149×197 cm., oil on canvas, reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.





4.11 Anonymous, *Eagle and Cactus*, 1834, from a broadsheet in *Papeles Varios*, The British Library Board.

4.12 *Codex Mendoza*, MS. Arch. Seld. A.1, fol. 2r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.



scene. Velasco pushed the changes much further, eliminating framing trees and hills, shifting the horizon line higher up the canvas, with the central vanishing point well below, rather than on, the horizon. This throws much greater emphasis on prominent and dramatic features in the foreground, which now seems to fall towards rather than away from the spectator, giving a slightly uneasy sense of extension rather than enclosure. Instead of the unifying golden or silver light of Claude (which in Landseer became a pinkish glow), Velasco's light is naturalistic. Like Constable, Velasco made studies of clouds, which he then used in his paintings for dramatic effect.

If we now go on to compare the 1875 *Valley of Mexico* with Velasco's most famous work, *View of the Valley of Mexico* [Pl. 4.9], of 1877, it is possible to see what has replaced the 'ideal' nature of the classical landscape, and also how Velasco succeeds in holding in balance the vista as a whole, and those wild and rugged features which resist the smoothing and unifying eye. The unremarkable picturesque figures in the foreground of *The Valley of Mexico* have vanished, to be replaced by an eagle, lower right, and a cactus. Although of course part of the natural scenery, these recall the myth of the founding of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, on the site where Mexico City now stands. In 1325, the legend goes, the wandering Mexica people took the advice of their tribal god, Huitzilopochtli, and settled at the spot where an eagle, with a snake in its claws, alighted on a cactus. This image [Pls 4.11,12], whose tradition goes back to the pre-Hispanic screenfolds, became the emblem of Mexico. The significance of the causeway, too, which connects the winding road to the city and is so important structurally to the picture, would not have been lost on Velasco's audience. It was one of those constructed to link Tenochtitlán from its island to the shores of Lake Texcoco. (Today, Mexico City has spread to cover almost the whole area.)

The painting as a whole, then, relates clearly to the historicist nationalism, described in chapter 2, whereby Mexico's pre-Spanish past was invoked to strengthen the idea of Mexico as a nation. The structure and iconography of the painting take on a new meaning in this context. The foreground, rather than receding gently from the spectator, sweeps away unchecked on the left, suggesting a vastness to the land, but at the same time the dark, saurian mass of the hill points clearly to the city. The rocks, vegetation and craggy hillside are not set up as signs of a wilderness resistant to man and civilization, as they might have been by a picturesque traveller, nor are they subsumed as types of an ideal nature, but as characteristic of Mexico. Others of Velasco's paintings share the sense of Mexican history impressed on the landscape, like *Netzahualcōyotl's Bath*, the views of the pyramids at Teotihuacán, or *The Savin of Popotla*, but none have the subtle and allegorical grandeur of *Mexico*.

Velasco was a successful and much commented-on artist during his lifetime. In general the criticism was favourable, but there was one famous attack on him by the poet and critic Altamirano.



Velasco's conservatism and Catholicism were antipathetic to Altamirano, but this was not the basis for the accusations in the latter's 'Salón 1879-80, Impresiones de un Aficionado'. There Altamirano criticizes Velasco, firstly for being too concerned with locality and not enough with art, and secondly, for restricting himself to localities that were boring and repetitive: the dry, yellowish-brown hills of the Valley of Mexico, with its unvarying vegetation. Altamirano urged him to seek instead the majestic peaks of the high sierras, and the tropical lands with their velvety flora and picturesque Indian huts.² He also complained that Velasco's landscapes looked as if they were painted through a telescope, 'which is not natural'.³

It is possible that this criticism had some influence on Velasco, for he did paint some tropical scenes. But even in these he is often more centrally concerned with celebrating another crucial aspect of Mexico at the time: its modernization. *El Citlaltépetl* [Pl. 4.13] depicts one of the major engineering feats of the Mexico City-Veracruz railway, completed in 1872, and 'the most important economic development' of the period.⁴ Contemporary photographs record almost exactly the same scene. In *El Citlaltépetl* and in *Bridge at Metlac* [Pl. 4.14] Velasco has added exuberant tropical foliage, delicately painted and light against the dark ground: nature and

4.13 José María Velasco, *El Citlaltépetl*, 1879, oil on canvas, 105×160 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

4.14 José María Velasco, *Bridge at Metlac*, 1881, oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown.



4.15 Anonymous, photograph of the railway at the Metlac ravine, from Meyer and Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, p.406, The Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin.



technology in balance. In many of his vistas, like the *Lake Chalco* [Pl. 4.16], a distant plume of smoke marks the railway track.

When Velasco visited Paris for the Exposition Universelle of



1889, where 68 of his paintings were shown, he encountered Impressionism for the first time. Fascinated by the new technique, he painted while in France a few studies of trees and mountainscapes, thoroughly European in aspect, and in a new manner, with much looser dabs and strokes of paint. However, it would be hard to find any trace of this after his return to Mexico, and it was for other artists, like Clausell, to bring Impressionism to Mexico. Velasco continued to paint views of the Valley, which, though mostly on a smaller scale than the canvases of the 1870s, retain his characteristic combination of naturalism and grandeur.

For Velasco's European contemporaries, 'landscape painting' had ceased to figure in the academic hierarchy of genres. Different attitudes to the painting of nature had led to radical changes in painting itself. Velasco, however, remained an academic painter, within the context of Mexico (he even made copies of his own paintings). But he transformed the genre, manipulating the structures of the classical landscape to depict a nature whose reality was bound up with an idea of Mexico.

4.16 José María Velasco, *Mexican Landscape with Lake Chalco*, 1885, oil on canvas, 49×71.6 cm., Národní Muzeum, Prague.