Great is Mind. Heaven’s height is immeasurable, but Mind goes beyond heaven; the earth’s depth is also unfathomable, but Mind reaches below the earth. The light of the sun and moon cannot be outdistanced, yet Mind passes beyond the light of the sun and moon. The macrocosm is limitless, yet Mind travels outside the macrocosm. How great is Space! How great the Primal Energy! Still Mind encompasses Space and generates the Primal Energy. Because of it heaven covers and earth upbears. Because of it the sun and moon move on, the four seasons come in succession, and all things are generated. Great indeed is Mind!

Zen Master Eisai

The exclamation points in Zen Master Eisai’s ecstatic depiction of Zen Mind express a perspective that runs counter to the problematic in the post-Renaissance Western conception of limitless time and space. One thinks of Pascal’s fear of infinite space and the mental disruption at the Victorian discovery of geologic time. Yet, as Zen Master Eisai exemplifies, the conception of limitless time and space, even into the demystification of the so-called postmodern condition, has been a component of world mysticism and its ecstatic experience.

From the Late Classical On the Sublime by the pseudo-Longinus which represented the sublime as transport (ekstasis) rather than mere pleasure, Western aesthetics has centered on the subjective and objective reception of profound experiences of nature and art. Particularly seventeenth and eighteenth-century English aestheticians suggested that sublime objects provoke fear or awe, separating such an experience from that of the beautiful. John Milton’s Paradise Lost was often invoked as an exemplar of the sublime. One might also think of Masaccio’s “Expulsion from Eden” with its Biblical grandeur and pathos to gather what these aestheticians were responding to. Accordingly, Continental and later American landscape painting featured Biblical subjects, as well as imagined classical scenes, that reflected the desired sublime affect of pleasure, pain, and awe. This conception of the sublime was also affected by Continental Romanticism and its celebration of the natural landscape. J. W. Turner’s atmospheric seascapes are good examples as are those of the later Impressionists who, like Turner, are intent on transforming nineteenth-century realistic landscape painting.
Yet in eighteenth-century England, as elsewhere, the Industrial Revolution quite literally bound the natural landscape and strained both the Biblical and pastoral idioms of the sublime. Thomas Cole (1801–48), the leader of the Hudson River school that included Asher Durand, J. F. Kensett, F. E. Church, Albert Bierstadt, and others was born in England but later emigrated to America in reaction to this encroachment.

Cole’s earliest painting, “Cattle and Distant Mountain” (1822), depicts a young male figure staring through a halo of trees into a pastoral scene. The cattle are standing near him on the other side of a fallen tree. In the far distance highlighted by sunlight in the painting’s only wide-open space is the mountain that is the object of the young male’s contemplative gaze. The figure is Cole himself in an enraptured mood that reflects the aesthetic sublime before natural landscapes that is a product of Romanticism and that Cole transfers to America where it later becomes infused with the native Transcendentalism.

Is such an aesthetic relevant in the twenty-first century when the aesthetic sublime is taken as another term for beauty as such while the landscape appears to remain worldwide the favorite form of painting? Cole’s confident stance in such an aesthetic belies a continuous testing of a succession of American landscape painters’ confidence in the ontological value of this aesthetic. This talk will examine the treatment of landscape and cityscape in three seminal paintings: Asher Durand’s “Kindred Spirits” (1849), Edward Hopper’s “Early Sunday Morning” (1930), and Andrew Wyeth’s “Pentecost” (1989), and many other American and Continental landscape paintings, to help understand that testing and the persistence of the aesthetic sublime in such painting. Both Hopper and Wyeth retain the painted observer in their many studies of figures by a window. But what these figures see and what they are meant to represent often differ drastically from those infused with Cole’s and his followers’ awe and celebration.

Cole’s “Cattle and Distant Mountain” incorporates, in addition to the observing figure, conventional elements of landscape painting. One of these is the aperture-like frame, perhaps an unintentional metaphor of the contemplative consciousness being led to indefinite and figuratively distant profound experience. It is related in Cole to Keats’s “magic casement” of the transported imagination. It is also related to and historically treated as dioramas. Most often trees or landforms form the aperture’s sides, and a mountain or other landform stands at the distant horizon. The Italian Salvator Rosa, as in his “River Landscape with Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl” (c. 1650), served as a model.² Besides