

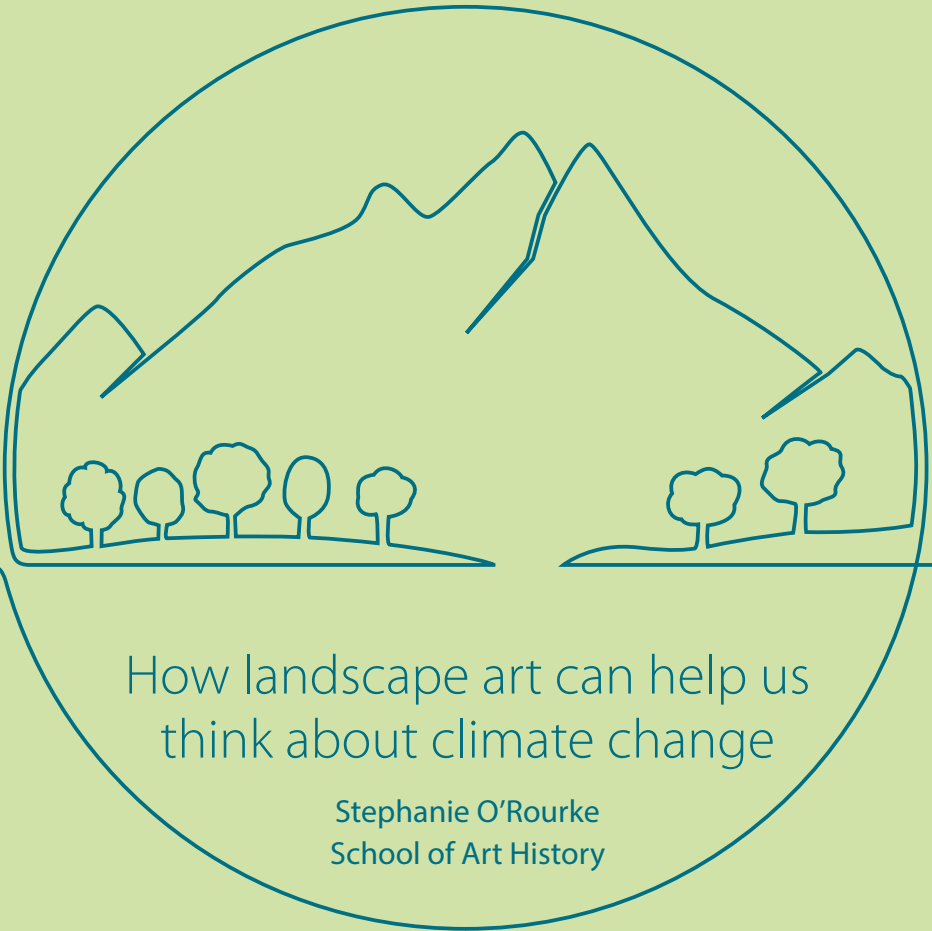


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How landscape art can help us
think about climate change

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How landscape art can help us think about climate change

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(Article written by Garry MacKenzie)

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Climate change is among the most complex problems that humanity has ever faced. One of the reasons for this is that it is simply too big for anyone to experience in its totality. The effects of climate change can be seen all over the world, but they sometimes seem to contradict one another. For example, global warming does not affect every region equally. Rising sea levels and increasing temperatures need to be plotted as long-term trends in order to be seen and understood. It is hard to relate our everyday experience of the world around us to events changing the climate of the planet, let alone to understand the causes of these events and how they can be alleviated. Comprehending facts, theories and case studies can only take us so far: nobody can grasp everything to do with climate change all at once. In fact, coming to terms with its complexity is often overwhelming.

At the start of the 19th century, geologists and other scientists were grappling with a similar dilemma as their discoveries revolutionised notions about the age of the earth. They discovered that instead of comprehensible timescales dating back a few thousand years, continents actually had a deep history stretching back hundreds of millions of years. As with climate change, deep time is measured on a scale that is

almost impossible for a human being to imagine. How do we begin to comprehend that a mountain is millions of years old when even the oldest humans live only about a century and recorded history stretches back only a few thousand years?

In her Leverhulme Trust-funded research project titled 'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape', Dr Stephanie O'Rourke, a Lecturer in the School of Art History, explores how artists in the late 18th and early 19th centuries dealt with this newly unfathomable distant past. Her research looks at how landscape artists engaged with the cutting-edge science of their day alongside a parallel rise in the commercial extraction of natural resources (especially coal). While it is tempting to assume that scientific thought and the arts exist in separate spheres, O'Rourke reveals a great deal of overlap between the disciplines around the time of the Industrial Revolution. Many artists were keen students of the natural world. They were often at the forefront of societal debates about how nature works, the role of human beings in nature, and why we should care about the world around us.

The art and science of landscapes

'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape' reveals just how central contemporary

science was to landscape artists around the start of the 19th century. To begin, it examines the representation of two kinds of natural resources in landscape painting: wood and minerals. The management of forests, a then-growing industry, raises questions about long-term sustainability. Maintaining a steady supply of timber requires thinking decades or centuries ahead into the future, which is something that societies throughout history have struggled to remember. In contrast, mining raises different questions about scale; materials such as coal are hidden underground and formed over a vast timescale. O'Rourke also looks at how British artists engaged with geology, particularly in their representations of volcanoes. Her research uncovers how French, German and British painters brought these questions of scale into their work.

Finally, 'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape' turns to an area in which European scientific, economic and political thinking perhaps carried the most pronounced impact: colonialism. O'Rourke considers how the visual culture of Pacific exploration brought together ideas about human evolution, race and resource extraction. These ideas were at the heart of contemporary Western thought and the imperialism that it underpinned.

The artists that O'Rourke discusses used their work to explore a new worldview in which the earth was so much older than human history and the impact of human activity suddenly seemed less

significant. Ironically, this was also the era when steam power was revolutionising European industry – an era that some environmental historians identify as the beginning of the Anthropocene. So, how does studying 18th- and 19th-century art relate to the climate concerns of the twenty-first century?

Landscape art and the 21st century

While these topics may seem to address the role of art in one historical period, 'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape' is not just about the art of the past. O'Rourke's research shows that artwork helps us experience ideas in a tangible and visual form rather than merely formulating them as abstract concepts. While landscape painters living two hundred years ago developed a visual culture that articulated the awesome power and incomprehensible age of the physical world, artists and art historians today can enable us to think more clearly about climate change.

The causes and effects of climate change are incredibly hard to disentangle from each other. The difficulty of having a clear perspective on this complex phenomenon – one in which we are both a perpetrator and a victim, which affects a planet that we are both part of and yet able to profoundly alter – can lead to confusion and defeatism. The arts are a valuable tool for understanding, and perhaps even shaping, our relationship with the world around us.

'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape' further illustrates how thinking about

climate change requires us to reach across disciplines. As the project reveals, artists have often engaged with the scientific ideas of their time. Art historians, too, must be alive to how interdisciplinarity opens up new ways of exploring complex issues. The multi-disciplinary research culture of the University of St Andrews has played an essential role in enabling O'Rourke's research. The project draws on initiatives including the Centre for French History and Culture as well as the c19c Cross Cultural Circa 19th Century Research Centre. Contributions from historians

of science (including Dr Sarah Easterby-Smith) and earth scientists (Dr Andrea Burke and Dr James Rae) have provided invaluable assistance.

Understanding climate change, its ramifications and its possible solutions is an immense scientific and cultural project. 'Picturing Nature, Painting Landscape' focuses on one aspect of cultural history so that we might learn from the art and science of the past. In doing so, we are better equipped to come to terms with both the present and the deep future.

Find out more

Researcher profile: www.st-andrews.ac.uk/art-history/people/so38

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