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The Allure of Mountain Presence

'The Lake of Lucerne, Moonlight, the Rigi in the Distance'.
(Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester)

Only very occasionally within the history of landscape painting has there occurred the image of the 'midnight mountain': mountains, usually single examples, in the darkness and under snow that project an enduring permanence, a fierce beauty which, if they are to be approached or climbed, can be linked to an idea of anticipated suffering or difficulties endured and through either, or both, the tempering of existence. The concept of the infinite runs parallel to this notion because within this visually simple image is often held an impression of limitless time, space unbounded and the unaccountable age of the landforms around us: a quality of the eternal, of an ageless austerity, whose minimalist modesty reflects an innocence that at once attracts and challenges us.

What aspects of scale, position, height or dominance in the landscape lend themselves to such qualities? What aspects of colour, light or distance add or create the suggestion of timeless permanence? Does the depiction of lofty isolation, deep snow and the night sky dominate the idea whereby only that which is big, bold and hardy will endure through the darkness of night? The perspective of the viewer becomes all-important; the blackness of night may reflect the darkness of our own nights. If a nighttime image

of darkness, mystery and impenetrability can act as a metaphor, then a snowbound summit can be seen as the white, pure, enigmatic and virginal counterpoint. The unchanged and unchanging, remote and isolated yet physical and inviting, is placed before us. As mountaineers, we are especially aware of the nature and complexities of that challenge. There is a fine blend of honour, desire and status that operates internally and publicly. But we can also acknowledge the purity and presence of the image inherent in this encounter.

This idea of an image of apparent emptiness being pregnant with possibilities is not unique to winter mountain paintings under starry skies. Artists like Edward Hopper[1] or the Norwegian painter Vilhelm Hammershøi[2] depicted the resonance of empty rooms, images charged with latent events, suggesting half-memories or vague promises. A strange stillness pervades their work. While apparently empty, the rooms generate a degree of tension that makes them inscrutable, despite their seeming openness and accessibility. They are silent paintings; their stillness and emptiness are somehow also lonely. We are viewing connections and separations simultaneously. There's a sense of isolation and disorientation where the silence is not based on any notion of absence. What Hopper and Hammershøi are depicting in their internal spaces is not impersonal: the light they evoke is an active presence symbolising understanding as illumination. It is this quality that the mountain paintings discussed here share; the midnight light that dominates these scenes is a presence not limited in any way. These mountains offer an acute sense of the infinite, unending, boundless, an absence bathed in presence. In these midnight mountains loneliness and sadness are translated into a timeless quality: the language of infinity in a constructed silence.

To portray a mountain scene in all its vastness, colour and structure, to render this on canvas so as to convey the stark beauty of a massif may well be challenge enough for any artist but to imply presence, whether human or eternal, is a significant step beyond all this. This specific midnight mountain topic was never a popular choice of subject matter for artists and the three painters and their examples touched on here, from greatly differing periods and cultures, are merely a starting point for reflection and consideration.

'The Lake of Lucerne, Moonlight, the Rigi in the Distance'[3]

The world of J M W Turner (1775-1851) has been well documented in numerous volumes, documentaries and feature films that deal with his life as well as his work: his themes, travels, exhibitions and style. While some have seen him as an early influence on the French Impressionists, Turner was never solely concerned with the effects of light upon colour but as much with what may be termed atmospherics. His fondness for

1. 'Sun in an Empty Room', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1963.
2. 'Study in Sunlight', The David Collection, Copenhagen, 1906.
3. 'The Lake of Lucerne, Moonlight, the Rigi in the Distance', 1841, watercolour, body colour on paper, some scratched out. 230mm x 307mm, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.

cloud effects at differing times of the day, direct sunlight at dawn and dusk, and sheets of rain moving across the landscape all echoed his intense interest in colour and his desire to create a sense of movement in his canvases. Monet, while living in London from 1899 to 1904, may very well have been aware of his work and works like 'Charing Cross Bridge', of which there are seven versions throughout the world, certainly suggest that appreciation. Yet a greater influence may be found in the work of Whistler whose series of 'Nocturnes', for example 'Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea' from 1871 and now at Yale and 'Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge' produced between 1872 and 1875 and now in Tate Britain, contribute much to the atmospheric theme.

Turner first visited Switzerland in 1802 and in 1819 spent time in Italy, and from then on 'his oil paintings tend more and more to the pale brilliance of colour.'[4] After this he seems to think in terms of coloured light: what Constable referred to as 'tinted steam'. Further trips to Italy, the last one in 1840, enhanced his work and allowed him to recreate almost magical effects of light on canvas.

Situated in central Switzerland at an elevation of 1,798m the Rigi massif is almost entirely surrounded by the waters of Lakes Lucerne, Zug and Lauerz. The main summit, Rigi Kulm, is technically not geologically part of the Alps but instead belongs to the Swiss Plateau. Over thirty paintings and sketches were produced of this view across the lake. The moonlit painting displays 'Turner's ever-changing rhetoric of sublime effects'[5] where the Rigi acts as a heart of darkness in the centre of this moonlit landscape. The central portion of this picture is thus dominated by those formless atmospherics where the movement of light is the central theme. Moonlight mirrored across the water is met by the same tone of smoke or mist held by the shadowed area of the massif whose upper section is caught in the moon's glow. The night sky is awash with lunar light held and reflected in the lake, thus generating a continuous circular movement of light flowing from top to bottom. The Rigi is not merely a backdrop but crucial to the composition, absorbing yet reflecting the moonlight in its elevated altitudes and creating the recessive core of the vision in the shadows beneath. The inclusion of the Rigi is not merely a useful background to a scene of Lake Lucerne but facilitates the constant movement of light in this delicate watercolour. Turner's mountain is intrinsically linked to atmospherics. Mist and moonlight are combined as part of the mystery of the scene and the allure of the mountain. The reflected moon-glow on the summit hints at the clarity that may be achieved by the mountaineer, but the journey is swathed in mist and uncertainty. The moonlight may endorse the calmness and serenity of the scene but inherent in the image is the dark verticality of the massif.

4. P & L Murray, *A Dictionary of Art and Artists,* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964, p325.
5. R Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, Harvill, London, 1990, p78.

'Winter's Night in Rodane'.
(National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo)

'Winter's Night in Rodane'[6]

Harald Sohlberg was born on 30 September 1869 in Oslo and died there on 19 June 1935. As a youth he attended the Royal School of Art and Design of Christiania, modern-day Oslo, and later trained as a graphic artist under Johan Nordhagen and in the studios of several Norwegian painters. He also enrolled at the art school of Kristian Zahrtmann in Copenhagen where he became aware of Gauguin and the Symbolist movement while he, himself, maintained a strong interest in Naturalism and a Neo-Romantic outlook.

He gained recognition for his many depictions of the mountains of Rondane and the town of Røros. His theme of 'Winter's Night in Rondane' exists in several variations. The view across Lake Atnsjøen to the mountains of Rondane is now serviced by a viewing station named the Sohlberg Platform opened in 2005 to facilitate the many tourists wishing to view the range as the artist had. His first version of the mountains was painted in 1901. The second, now in the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, was produced between 1911-1914, and has become the unofficial national painting of Norway. Dissatisfied with this effort he produced a chromolithograph of the subject in 1917 and went on to create a third painted version between 1918 and 1924. Alongside this he produced some 250 lithographic prints of the subject. He lived with his wife nearby in Røros from 1902 until 1905; a town situated on the high plains of central Norway surrounded by the landscape that became the principal inspiration in his career.

6. 'Winter's Night in Rodane', also known as 'Winter Night in the Mountains', 1914, oil on canvas, 160cm x 180.5cm, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo.

In his canvas the winter peaks around Rondane are condensed into a semi symmetrical composition and with the artist's reduction of actual space came a simplification in form and a dramatisation of their steepness. The seven major peaks compressed into the canvas stretch from Storsvulten at 1,871m to the far end of the range and Storronden (2138m). The viewer is framed on both sides by dark winter woodlands that part and drop away to reveal the vast snowy upland area around Rodane. Sohlberg compresses the physicality of the mountains to create a distant luminous realm, starlit and soft under its mantle of snow yet cold and distant. The mountains appear rounded, almost gentle, with a central valley leading off into the night where the higher peaks just catch a clearer moon-glow. Yet it is this very softness held by the areas of dark navy blue that is at once the allure and the warning: a beckoning and a threat to those who would venture there.

'Mount Adams, Washington'[7]

Albert Bierstadt was born on the 7 January 1830 in Solingen in what was then Prussia and died in New York on 18 February 1902. Emigrating with his family as a child Bierstadt returned to Germany for several years to study painting in Dusseldorf and on his arrival back in America was quickly linked to the Hudson River School in New York. (*Editor's note:* see also 'Thomas Moran and the American Mountain Vision', *Alpine Journal* 2019.) In 1859 he took part in one of the grand surveys of the American West organised by the American government. Much of the work developed from this explorative journey was completed in 1860 and saw him elected to the National Academy of Design. In 1863 he again visited the West, using the studies made to produce large-scale canvases in his studio in New York. Alongside Thomas Moran he became one of the pre-eminent painters of the western American landscape.

He visited London in 1867 and travelled through Europe for two years while still continuing to paint mountain scenes of the American West. His 'Among the Sierra Nevada, California' was painted in Rome and exhibited in Berlin and London before being shipped home. Bierstadt's drive for commercial success was directed and reflected by the grandiose quality of his subject matter and his capacity for self-promotion.

His involvement with a romantic treatment of his subject matter and overly dramatic lighting became heightened in his later years and was regarded as excessive by many critics. His inability to alter or moderate his style, or even temper his dramatisations, saw his work fall out of favour and attacked for its theatricality. In 1882 a fire destroyed his studio in New York and many of his paintings were lost. This, and the loss of his wife in 1893 to tuberculosis, must have greatly shaken his confidence and he narrowly avoided bankruptcy in 1895. By the time of his death in 1902 the desire for large landscapes of an epic nature had evaporated and his work was largely forgotten. The man himself is commemorated in Mount Bierstadt (4287m)

7. 'Mount Adams', 1875, oil on canvas, 213cm x 138cm, Princeton University Art Museum.

'Mount Adams, Washington', 1865. *(Princeton University Art Museum)*

and Bierstadt Lake in Colorado, and for the fact that he was probably the first European to visit, in 1863, the summit of Mount Evans (4350m) in the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, some 70km south west of Denver.

Mount Adams, also known as Pahto or Klickitat, is a potentially active strato-volcano some 55km from Mount St Helens in the Cascades, which stretch from southern British Columbia through Washington and Oregon to northern California. At 3,743m it is the second highest in the range, behind Mt Rainier at 4,392m.

In Bierstadt's depiction the mountain emerges from low cloud drifting across lesser hills in the mid ground: a dazzling white ridge dominating the entire scene and seemingly controlling the cloud as some form of base material. The soaring verticality is balanced and enhanced by the flat grassy plain in the foreground where a group of Native Americans dwarfed by the mountain massif stand in awe of its majesty, thus granting a mystical, even sacred status to the landscape. (There are a number of indigenous legends that link Mount Adams with its volcano neighbours St Helens and Hood.) It is the mountain itself that highlights the scene since its overwhelming whiteness reflects light onto the plain below, where the scale of the figures and luminous quality of the mountain indicate its enigmatic character, beckoning yet unknowable, recognisable yet tremendous: hallmarks of this sub-genre.

What we become aware of in all these canvases is the idea of presence, of something greater than life, something indomitable, fearless, emblematic, something that endures through the ages. They set a scene that holds our attention as if something were about to happen, an action about to start. The only question is whether we are about to be witnesses or participants. Presence invites us to look but also to involve us in the image and in that psychological involvement to fire imagination and ambition. Presence is a declaration, an occurrence that we note but that defies easy articulation. It is presence that allows the experience of connectedness with the scene. 'Presence is the ephemeral apparition of the experience of oneness, wholeness and unity'[8] inserting itself into consciousness.

What is suggested to us is a distillate of the sublime and the physical. Midnight mountains combine the profound beauty of the mountain environment with the challenge and allure of adventure, a process that verges on the sublime as fascination offers the possibility of encounter. In that moment of recognition, the words of Robert Macfarlane come to mind: 'Time has flown over you and left its shadow behind.'[9] In the winter darkness there emerges a wildness and unpredictability that stretches beyond allure, that becomes part of the timeless magnetism of the high peaks and that continues to urge us to find out what the horizon has closed off.

What is intrinsic is the fact that the mountains do not care; we do, and we must search in, and for, that environment and the ambience it offers. The truth we discover is that 'mountains exert their greatest emotive power when they are lonely and unblemished.'[10] What this generates is essentially an uncomplicated love of the natural world that drives beyond the end of the known to where we sense a realm of mystery. It is the gift of these apparently simple images to shift the way we see ourselves; they allow us to focus and restore our wonder.

8. R Greene, *Searching for Presence,* Rodopi, Amsterdam & New York, 2004, p102.
9. From narration of 'Mountain', written by R Macfarlane & J Peedom, 2017.
10. M Moran, *Higher Ground,* Sandstone, Dingwall, 2014, p188.