

## *The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape*

THERE exists, I believe, a doctoral thesis on the subject of landscape painting in the Catacombs, the first section of which bears the memorable heading: *The Reasons for the Absence of Landscape Painting from the Catacombs*. The title of this article may well evoke apprehensions about its dealing with a topic of similar magnitude. The space devoted to landscape painting in Renaissance writings on artistic theory is so small that the subject would hardly deserve much attention were it not for one startling fact—that in a good many cases these references precede the practice they purport to describe. I do not remember if the *doctorandus* mentioned above came to the conclusion that Catacomb art had an important influence on the branch of painting so conspicuously absent from its repertoire, but it is certainly the intention of this article to suggest that landscape painting as we know it might never have developed without the artistic theories of the Italian Renaissance.

To remove this assertion from the sphere of paradoxes only one clarification is needed. By landscape painting I do not mean any rendering of the outdoor scene, but the established and recognized genre of art. This important distinction cannot be better illustrated than through the words of a seventeenth-century painter who had been in personal contact with Rubens and Paul Bril. Writing in about 1650, Edward Norgate devoted several pages of his *Miniatura* to landscape, 'of all kinds of painting the most innocent, and which the Divill himselfe could never accuse of Idolatry'.

. . . it doth not appeare that the antients made any other Accompt or use of it but as a servant to their other peeces, to illustrate or sett of their Historicall painting by filling up the empty Corners, or void places of Figures and story, with some fragment of Landscape . . . , as may be seene in those incomparable *Cartoni* of the Acts of the Apostles. . . .

But to reduce this part of painting to an absolute and intire Art, and to confine a man's industry for the tearme of Life to this onely, is as I conceive an Invencon of these later times, and though a Noveltie, yet a good one, that to the Inventors and Professors hath brought both honour and profit.<sup>1</sup>

The story which Norgate tells of the invention of this new genre will detain us later. What matters here is that landscape painting was felt to be a real discovery. For this distinction between landscape backgrounds and Landscape as 'an absolute and entire Art' has perhaps become a little blurred. Indeed, most historians of the subject appear to take the view that the one developed gradually out of the other.<sup>2</sup>

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This paper was one of a collection of essays presented to Hans Tietze on the occasion of his 70th birthday, March, 1950.