

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

HISTORIC AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTEXT

Dr. Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison of the Dancing Star Foundation will be providing a major essay for the traveling museum exhibition, Environmental Impact. Together, they comprise sixty years of art and natural history field research, exploration, writing, photography and filmmaking, and form one of the most unique professional conservationist couples in the world. The following excerpt previews the exhibition and their exacting contribution. Tobias and Morrison's essay will place Wagner's contemporary Environmental Impact exhibition in a context that encompasses explicit connections in the history of art and that suggests influences emanating from a diversity of artists and art as agents of ecological consciousness raising if not change.

David Wagner's forthcoming exhibition, *Environmental Impact*, represents a new level of broad yet focused appreciation for the sheer power, promise, and impact of art on the wisdom and sensibilities of current environmental issues. The myriad of artists, media and subject matter that will be included in the exhibition combine to convey a remarkable testimony to the urgency, persuasiveness and abundance of insights, perspectives, and power of art. *Environmental Impact* is packed not with empty mantras to a better state of being for the planet and all that dwell therein, or a blind and grasping homage to the beauty of life itself, but with deeply personal statements that range from confessionals to art with activist impulses.

Viewers of *Environmental Impact* will experience the beauty, the turmoil, the levels of ambiguity and mixed message, but may also feel unexpected epiphanies, even pragmatic responses to environmental concern and outright crisis that art uniquely provides the human spirit.

We see this tradition of environmental impact going back as far as documented art itself: to the earliest known records of Paleolithic aesthetic sensibility; to Mesolithic depictions of animal life in regions where the rain curtain would subsequently shift, exposing stark yet revealing petroglyphs in desert canons that joined with later Egyptian and Greco-Roman frescoes to suggest an incipient grasp of the power of nature over human consciousness. This power—humanity's need and capacity, that is, to celebrate and revere nature—may well be the very key to humanity's survival, if not the key to the endowment and pertinacity of the rest of those species and populations that cohabit the planet with us. We may have overwhelmed most other life forms, as E. O. Wilson, in his 2012 book *The Social Conquest of Earth* has intimated (perhaps as a negative consequence of the enormous impact of our ancestor's transition to at least partial meat eating, or one may so adduce) but our artistic reveries have only escalated in the wake of our seeming disassociation from the world of nature to which we were once so much more intimately attuned. A 2012 Earth Policy Release by Janet Larsen "Meat Consumption in China Now Double That in the United States" (http://www.earth-policy.org/plan_b_updates/2012/update102) shows how the Mandarin symbol in China for home shows a pig under a roof. Today, that same pig is being slaughtered for human consumption in factory farms.

Art, however, has only gain in its power to heal and to save, against the backdrop of such animal rights and environmental pain and impact.

In the hands of great artists, art has been an agent of ecological consciousness raising and transformation. Classic examples include the seminal *Vision of St Eustace*, c.1440 by Antonio

Pisano (Pisanello) in London's National Gallery; and Dutch Paulus Potter who, at the age of 22 painted *Punishment of the Hunter*, now in the Hermitage. Other remarkable examples include British photographer John Bulmer's 1963 image of a man and two dogs looking out over a grotesquely polluted city in *View Over The Potteries, Stoke on Trent*; disturbing photographs by Sebastião Salgado of famine in Africa and oppression in Brazilian mines reminiscent of Charles Dickens' novel, *Bleak House*; and Nigel Brown whose transformative work treats, among other things, the impact of British colonization—beginning with Captain Cook—on Brown's home country of New Zealand, as particularly figured in Brown's famed, magnificent stained glass project for the Auckland Cathedral (Parnell Street, 1998).

Other environmental art clearly impacts in ways least traveled by, as in the case of one of the world's earliest signed sand gardens, that of the 15th century Ryoanji Zen Temple in Kyoto. Conversely, the history of ornithological art—one of the greatest of natural history aesthetic media—originated in a frenzy of Latin-driven science based orientations, deriving from Aristotelian biology and culminating in such mammoth approaches to depicting the natural world as displayed by the great Buffon, Audubon, John Gould and J. G. Keulemans. It was this latter, prolific artist who supplied both Walter Lawry Buller (1838–1906) and Lord Walter Rothschild (1868–1937) magnificent paintings for their respective books on the Birds of New Zealand, and Extinct Birds, ushering in an era—in keeping with the transcendentalist calls for preservation of John Muir, Abraham Lincoln, Emerson and Thoreau, even the French painter Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) and Scottish/American Luminist George Inness (1825–1894)—that would come to dominate the emerging environmental rallying cries of the 20th and 21st centuries. E. O. Wilson's aforementioned study actually commences with an examination of the subject matter and probable motivations goading one of Gauguin's most salient, culminating meditations on human nature and the Tahitian landscape, his painting, *D'où Venons Nous/Que Sommes Nous/Où Allons Nous (Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?)*

It was Inness, borrowing from a precedent in Thomas Cole (the forest stumps in many of his paintings) who frequently placed

a clear and active smokestack within an otherwise perfectly tranquil natural scene. This is most clearly delineated in Inness' "The Lackawanna Valley" (c.1856) in The National Gallery in Washington D.C.

By 1923, the very love and admiration of artists spawned overpopulation by tourists in the Yosemite valley, air pollution, the obfuscation of indigenous populations (the Southern Miwok, for example), and other blights, while a million automobiles entered Yosemite National Park to the tune of a park superintendent declaring that Americans should be able to visit the parks in the standard to which they were accustomed (namely, in automobiles). This mob of adulation accounted for the carving of an automobile-sized hole through a giant redwood, an iconic, even celebrated statement at the time, of the conflict of the public's love of nature, and the sad truth of the democratization of Eden.

By the late 1940s, sensitivity to natural scenery had been clearly revolutionized: National Geographic's pictorial spread of the North Cascades' sublimity, after a similar depiction of Yellowstone many decades before by nineteenth-century painter, Thomas Moran, would result in such public fanfare and a storm of the earliest so-called eco-tourism and picture postcards by photographers Eadweard Muybridge as to force the hand of Congress in their determination to protect over-crowded sites of world-heritage class stature.

All of these conflicting attitudes and historic truths combine to inject countless ambiguities into the history of landscape art, and the environmental impact that has arisen in the historic and cumulative sensibility of protecting paradise, as it were. These are but a few among the many resonances of David Wagner's upcoming exhibition, *Environmental Impact*.

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