

## INTRODUCTION

*A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* was published in 1785 or 1786, in the last year of its author's life. There is no record of the number of copies originally printed and today barely a handful of complete editions survive. The book was virtually unknown in the nineteenth century, and began to receive attention again only when the work of Cozens was reconsidered in the 1920's. Nonetheless, the author was well known in his own day in artistic and fashionable circles. He was a successful drawing master and author of several didactic treatises on art. He was a friend and mentor of the wealthy eccentric William Beckford, author of *Vathek* and builder of his own Gothic abbey near Bath. But he was, above all, an important British exponent of the classical or idealizing school of landscape art.

Alexander Cozens was born in Russia, probably in 1717, the son of an English shipbuilder employed by Peter the Great. There is an old story that he was an illegitimate child of the Czar but this appears to be without foundation. He grew up in the English colony of Petersburg, saw the northern lights in the Arctic port of Archangel, and kissed the hand of the dead Czar in 1725. It is possible that he knew the Western works in the collection of Peter the Great, as well as some Oriental drawings, but it is more likely that he was introduced to art through Dutch engravings and through the cartographers and architectural draughtsmen who worked in the Petersburg shipyards.

For several years before 1746 Cozens lived in Italy. We know a good deal of his life there from notes that survive with a book of sketches in the British Museum. In Rome, as in Petersburg, he spent much of his time with other members of the English colony. He was already devoting his talents to landscape art, and made many powerful studies of the Roman Campagna at a time when most British artists were copying Old Masters and drawing from antique sculpture. (Richard Wilson, who was to become the most famous British imitator of Claude, was not converted to landscape until six years later.) Cozens was also by this time a prolific maker of systems: in his sketchbook we find notes for some twenty different schemes for drawing landscapes. His idealist conception of art and his solitary imagination are already apparent in the strange private manifesto jotted in his Roman notes:

I will study beauty of form and enjoy elegant ideas, set the image of a charming face fore [my mind], feed on its lovely innocence and by it flatter my longing soul with visions of happiness tho' but in picture, for I will immure myself in solitude and paint the graces, act truth, and contemplate virtue.

To the artists of the eighteenth century, the Italian landscape was imbued with a daunting assortment of historical connotations. It was the countryside of the birth of man's civilization and of his earliest achievements in art, literature and politics: the original *locus classicus*. It had also witnessed the artistic Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; its skies, rocks, and valleys had been painted by Bellini, Giorgione, Leonardo, and later the Carracci and their followers. These historical distinctions provided the foundation of the imaginary classical landscapes painted by Claude in the seventeenth century. His images of a vanished pastoral civilization are the fruits of a nearly lifelong scrutiny of the Italian countryside. English travelers of the eighteenth century went to Italy in search of the magnificent scenes they knew from the art of Claude, and their artists sought to reproduce the sensations aroused by his works. The Italian landscape remained a touchstone for many English artists well into the nineteenth century; Turner's large Venetian compositions, for example, are clearly meant as a challenge to the Italian masters on their own ground. To these artists Italy must have seemed a meeting-place of reality and the imagination, and as such it provided just the right nourishment for the young Cozens, who was already dedicated to an ideal theory of art and inclined by temperament to solitary musing. The rocky heights of the Italian Alps and the valleys and fields of the Campagna, more than any features of the English (or Russian) landscape, remained throughout his life the basis of his art.

When Cozens returned to England in 1746 he was an accomplished landscape draughtsman. Shortly thereafter he married the daughter of the printer John Pine; they had a son, John Robert, born in 1752. In 1749 he had become drawing master at the school of Christ's Hospital in London, a post which he resigned in 1753. He continued to teach privately for the rest of his life, his pupils including at least two of the Royal princes. He was drawing master at Eton from the mid-1760's through the 1770's. No doubt his interest in compiling systems, already evinced in his Roman notebook, was further encouraged by his experience as a teacher. (In the *New Method* he attributes the origins of the blot technique to the exigencies of instruction.) In 1771 he published *The Shape, Skeleton, and Foliage of Thirty-two Species of Trees for the Use of Painting and Drawing*, a book that provided the amateur draughtsman with a set of rudimentary patterns which he could copy and arrange into landscape compositions.

Ideal landscape art lends itself to this sort of textbook approach: the trees are presented as part of the vocabulary which the artist must master if he is to speak in the idiom of Claude. The examples of cloud formation in the *New Method* are meant to serve the same purpose. But where the trees could offer little instruction to a serious artist, the clouds were copied by Constable, who was, in particular, a master painter of skies. Cloud shapes are the most volatile and indeterminate of phenomena, and therefore the most resistant to classification — whether the

classification is aesthetic, like Cozens', or scientific, like Luke Howard's, some two generations after Cozens. That Constable should copy Cozens' engravings is proof, as E. H. Gombrich has pointed out, that even for an observer as acute as Constable, there is no direct avenue to reality; the formulas provide a comparative standard which can be used to explore phenomena.

A similar intent informed *The Principles of Beauty Relative to the Human Head*, which Cozens published in 1778, and which included among its subscribers the King and many of the leading clerical, political, and artistic figures of the day. In this book Cozens set out to establish by mathematical proportions an archetype of what he called "simple beauty." He showed that by subjecting this type to a fixed series of variations certain other types of character could be represented. Here again we find Cozens' preoccupation with "ideal form" and his habit of trying to form a theory from the schemata he used in teaching and drawing. He was, however, neither a systematic thinker nor an efficient writer. And though he was clearly fascinated with the ever-multiplying implications of his own ideas, he knew the limitations of system-making in the fine arts: "Principles and rules have it not in their power to circumscribe the bounds of genius."

One might think that of all the genres, landscape painting would be the least susceptible to systematic treatment. One looks and one paints what one sees. But such an approach was rejected by most English artists of the eighteenth century. When Thomas Gainsborough was asked by Lord Hardwicke to paint a view of the Lord's estate, he replied, in the polite third-person of the usage of the time:

... with regard to *real views* from nature in this country, he has never seen any place that affords a subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gasper or Claude . . . if his Lordship wishes to have anything tolerable of the name of G[ainsborough], the subject altogether, as well as figures, etc., must be of his own brain . . . .

The artistic theory of the time placed historical and allegorical painting above portraiture, genre, and landscape. By spurning what Fuseli called "the last branch of uninteresting subjects, that kind of landscape which is entirely occupied with the tame delineation of a given spot," painters such as Gainsborough and Cozens hoped to elevate landscape to the realm of the ideal, as Claude had done by composing his vast scenery around figures from mythology. Cozens explains this principle in his introduction to the *New Method*:

Composing landscapes by invention is not the art of imitating individual nature; it is more; it is forming artificial representations of landscape on the general principles of nature, founded in unity of character, which is true

simplicity; concentrating in each individual composition the beauties which judicious imitation would select from those which are dispersed in nature.

In adopting this tradition of ideal landscape, Cozens was influenced not only by Claude but by Salvator Rosa, a seventeenth-century Neapolitan. Nothing could be further removed from the gentle Arcadies of Claude than the violent seas and threatening forests of Rosa. In Cozens' own work, executed almost entirely on paper in pen and wash, we find some of the same awful depths and distances, as well as that icy air of solitude that especially distinguishes Rosa's work. Cozens worked in a smaller format than Rosa, and this helped to give his invented landscapes a peculiar atmospheric concentration in which bald mountain peaks appear like glass and huge forests sink into pools of shade. It was no doubt this appreciation of the vertiginous and the extraordinary which made Cozens sympathetic to the young Beckford. He declared to his friend in Naples, the first Lady Hamilton, that of all his acquaintances in England, "except Mr. Cozens, whom you have heard me so frequently mention, not an animal comprehends me." Beckford and Cozens shared a passion for nature heightened by the imagination; they wanted art to excite their sense of wonder. It is interesting to note that Cozens' wash-drawings in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1770 were singled out for approval by Horace Walpole, author of the *Castle of Otranto* and one of the pioneers of the "Gothic Taste." Cozens may be seen as one of those curious transitional figures, in whom the classical taste, by a subtle variation, becomes an enthusiasm for the strange, the awe-inspiring, what was called in different contexts the Gothic or sublime. A similar figure is the poet William Collins, a near contemporary of Cozens, who also took great delight in "scenes . . . which daring to depart from sober truth, are still to nature true." The link between this fascination with the fantastic and the remote and Cozens' interest in system-making is suggested by Beckford's description: "Cozens is here very happy, very solitary, and almost as full of systems as the universe." Both solitude and system-making give free rein to the imagination; the mind feeds upon itself, without the intrusions of society or the exigencies of practice.

Cozens' art was an art of the mind. His intention was, paradoxically, to produce landscapes that derived neither from the Old Masters nor from "nature herself." He therefore went in search of "some spontaneous method of bringing the conception of an ideal subject fully to view (though in the crudest manner)." Somehow he hit upon the practice of looking for landscape compositions — arrangements of trees, mountains, lakes, etc. — in blots of ink. Only later did he discover that Leonardo, who, like Cozens, compared the painter with the poet and the dreamer, had anticipated him. In the *New Method* he quotes with pride the famous passage in which Leonardo explains his "new and speculative idea."

But even Leonardo was not the first to teach that "from a confusion of shapes the spirit is quickened to new inventions." The eleventh-century Chinese artist Sung Ti is reported to have criticized the paintings of a colleague for their "want of natural effect" and recommended the following course: "You should choose an old tumbledown wall and throw over it a piece of white silk. Then morning and evening you should gaze at it until, at length, you can see the ruins through the silk, its prominences, its levels, its zig-zags, and its cleavages, storing them up in your mind and fixing them in your eyes. Make the prominences your mountains, the lower part your water, the hollows your ravines, the cracks your streams, the lighter parts your nearest points, the darker parts your more distant points. Get all these thoroughly into you, and soon you will see men, birds, plants and trees, flying and moving among them. You may then ply your brush according to your fancy, and the result will be of heaven, not of men." Though the Chinese artist recommends a slower, more contemplative procedure than Leonardo, the principle of "quickening the invention" remains the same. Where there is no single definite form, the possible forms multiply, and by exploring these possibilities the artist discovers one that suits his skills and excites his sensibility. The ambiguous and indeterminate stimulate the imagination, and at the same time they leave it free to follow its natural course, according to the inclination of the artist.

A more clinical but by no means contradictory explanation of the blot technique was proposed some one hundred years after Cozens by the Swiss scientist, Hermann Rorschach. He found that people will "read" or "project" into the chance configurations of inkblots their own deep concerns or preoccupations. The blots can therefore be used to help diagnose emotional disturbances. Human beings, we now realize, are inclined to construe visual forms according to their previous experience: the blot sets off a train of associations which may lead almost anywhere. Cozens himself explained that blotting does not work by chance alone: it "has a direct tendency to recall landscape ideas." The blots recall not only personal experiences of landscape but landscape paintings, particularly scenes of the type painted by Claude. They were meant to help the student not merely to create (which would have resulted in subjects for analysis more than works of art), but specifically to create "ideal landscapes."

When Cozens quoted Shakespeare's "The art itself is nature" in his epigraph, he was not only thinking of that continuity between nature and art which was a basic tenet of classical and particularly Claudian art. He was also, no doubt, thinking of how his system utilized the effects of chance to produce art, and how that art, in turn, became a true image of nature. This paradoxical identity of nature and art rests on what we would call today the socialization of perception: we see what we have been prepared to see. Our knowledge shapes our experience. Without this social or culture preparation, it would be impossible to produce an

ideal landscape, which, while it did not exist, was more or less true to nature, or to find natural forms in an indeterminate blot. The purpose of Cozens' method was to exploit our "knowledge . . . without loss of power," to use Wordsworth's formula; he wanted to use the tradition of landscape art without producing stale imitations; he wanted to produce something that was recognizable without being merely derivative. The blot provided that note of the unexpected or the novel which Cozens (and Beckford) believed was essential in art. To this end he urged his students to "preserve the spirit of the blot as much as possible."

A further paradox suggested by Cozens' method is that art becomes more personal through the intervention of chance. "An artificial blot," he explained, "will suggest different ideas to different persons; on which account it has the strongest tendency to enlarge the powers of invention, being more effectual to that purpose than the study of nature alone." Cozens must have known, though he did not say, that this was more true for artists who had already mastered the basic skills than for beginners. He did go so far as to say that "the use of blotting may be a help even to a genius; and where there is latent genius, it helps to bring it forth." There is no doubt that the blot method suited Cozens' own style particularly well. He was known for his evocative wash-drawings in sepia, a technique which Claude had used and examples of which were in many English collections. This style dispenses with line as much as possible and relies on variations in tone to articulate detail. Claude, in particular, was a master at creating a pervasive atmosphere of light from which all the separate forms take their particular character. "In nature," Cozens says, "forms are not distinguished by lines, but by shade and colour." And the blot, which "gives an idea of the masses of light and shade," is therefore a useful starting point. He instructs the student to divide and sub-divide the general areas of black and white into different degrees of his basic tone. He even stipulates that these gradations are to be used to give an effect of distance. In his own work he was adept at using the tonal relation of foreground and background to suggest vast spaces, while at the same time maintaining the compositional unity which makes those spaces palpable. The crude mezzotints in the *New Method* give little idea of Cozens' skill at educing the third dimension from the flat blot. Fortunately, a number of the original blots and the drawings made from them have survived, and in them Cozens' artistry is fully displayed.

Cozens' blots differ from the walls of Leonardo and Sung Ti in that they combine the inadvertent with the intentional: "an artificial blot is a production of chance, with a small degree of design." When you make a blot, Cozens tells us, you must first "possess your mind strongly with a subject," The spontaneous conversion of nature into art is achieved through a kind of meditative discipline: "the attention of the performer must be employed on the whole, or the general form of the composition, and upon this only, while the subordinate parts are left

to the casual motion of the hand and the brush." The result of this process may be considered a work of art in its own right, and many of Cozens' blots are of great beauty, producing an effect of solidity through ellipsis. When Cozens made a blot he called upon all his skill and experience to do instantaneous justice to the elusive image he beheld within. He was not worried if his blots began to look more like half-finished works: "If what is intended for a blot proves to be a spirited sketch, the artist has only the less to invent in his drawing." Cozens' blot method resembles some of the Impressionists' techniques (though not their aims) in this respect: they both seek to capture the effects of light through the spontaneous movement of the artist's hand. And just as people found that they could transform any painting into an "Impressionist" painting by squinting at it, so Cozens discovered blots latent in the most finished works of art: "If a finished drawing be gradually removed from the eye its smaller parts will be less and less expressive; and when they are wholly undistinguished, and the largest parts alone remain visible, the drawing will then represent a blot."

Cozens died in 1786, soon after the publication of the *New Method*. Although some artists, such as William Gilpin, Joseph Wright of Derby, and George Romney, experimented with blots, the technique was never widely practiced. Cozens' influence was felt by later artists mainly through the work of his son, John Robert Cozens. He too produced small-scale landscapes in the classical tradition, mostly of the Alps and the Italian Campagna. He differs from his father in his use of pale washes in grey, green and blue, which give a luminous delicacy to the severe heights and distances painted by his father. J. R. Cozens went insane in the last years of his life and was treated by Dr. Monroe, the host of an informal landscape "academy," whose members included the young Turner and Girtin. We know that they copied a number of John Robert Cozens' sketches from Dr. Monroe's collection, and it is fair to assume that they knew the work of his father, examples of which were also owned by Dr. Monroe. Constable, a different kind of landscape artist, was familiar with the *New Method*, and, as we have seen, copied several of the plates. He also knew the work of the younger Cozens, calling him, with some hyperbole, "the greatest artist that ever touched landscape," and declaring his work to be "all poetry." In the work of Alexander and John Robert Cozens the tradition of Claude, Rosa, and Gaspard Poussin was transformed into an English mode: a concentrated and private art which appealed to the imagination, and which was to provide a key source for the great personal visions of Constable and Turner.

A  
NEW METHOD  
OF  
ASSISTING THE INVENTION  
IN  
DRAWING  
ORIGINAL  
COMPOSITIONS of LANDSCAPE.

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By ALEXANDER COZENS.

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————— “ Ex fumo dare lucem  
“ Cogitat, ut speciosa dehinc miracula promat.” HORACE.

“ Sometime we see a Cloud that's dragonish,  
“ A Vapour sometime like a Bear, or Lion,  
“ A tower'd Citadel, a pendant Rock,  
“ A forked Mountain, or Promontory,  
“ With Trees upon't, that nod unto the World,  
“ And mock our Eyes with Air.”

SHAKESP. *Ant.* and *Cleop.* Act IV. Scene II.

————— “ This is an Art  
“ Which does mend Nature, change it rather; but  
“ The Art itself is Nature.” SHAKESPEAR.

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