THE SOUL OF ALL SCENERY
A HISTORY OF THE SKY IN ART

Preface

For centuries, painters have recognized that the sky is, as Thomas Cole once wrote, `the soul of all scenery', and have painted it accordingly. Go to the art museums and observe carefully how much space and effort the great artists have devoted to the sky. Worlds you may never have noticed will open up before your eyes. Behind the Mona Lisa's elusive smile is a misty canopy of air that Leonardo painted deliberately after years of observation and research to magnify the distant mountains and impart an aura of grandeur and mystery.

Aside from the attentions of the great artists and a scattering of naturalists, the atmosphere has been one of humankind's most persistent collective blind spots. As a result, pitifully little has been written on all the artists' aerial triumphs. One remarkable exception was John Ruskin's pioneering study, Modern Painters, which first appeared in 1843 and included large sections devoted to meteorological aspects of art. A century of almost absolute silence followed, during which the subject was buried under a vast wasteland of vacuous adjectives containing little more substance than a few conventionally obligatory references to the phenomenon Leonardo named aerial perspective.

The study of the sky in art also remained moribund for reasons that stem from the century-old forced separation of art and science into two cultures. Our blind acceptance of the cult that artistic creativity exists in a vacuum of emotive genius has brought us to the point that when we see clouds in paintings we refuse to believe that the artist may have intended simply to paint clouds. Art historians retreat to the shade of clouds' symbolic meanings and iconographic content, all the time remaining ignorant of the nature of clouds and simultaneously demeaning naturalistic interpretations as pedestrian at best. Meteorologists pass by the painted clouds involuntarily, never daring to risk exposure as uncultured boors by applying their expertise to what they have been warned may be no more than irrelevant phantasms.

Over the past half-century a few nonconforming meteorologists and art historians have begun to redraw attention to the meteorological content of art. I conceived and wrote *The Soul of all Scenery* in the environment of growing knowledge and acceptance provided by their studies. They helped me see paintings with the dual view of the meteorologist's focus on natural source material and the art historian's emphasis on cultural sources, and thereby expose the enduring tryst of science and art.

The Soul of All Scenery is a cultural and natural history of artistic discovery of the atmosphere's many faces - its colors, optical phenomena, clouds, signs of changing weather, and marks of climate. Painted and real skies are compared and analyzed with a scientific perspective that has, in many cases, become avaiable only during the past century. Thus, for example, I demonstrate that the seventeenth century Dutch painters disclosed piece by piece a picture of the clouds and weather around winter storms, a picture not synthesized until the decades following World War I!

I also show how artists have treated the atmosphere as the soul of their scenery. The ever changing, cloud laced skies of Holland gave her sky painters more than adequate cause to pursue the fleeting rays of light on their mostly shaded land and seek the essence of motion and change. In China, a land where haze, mist or dust often bleach the sky to near white and blur all distant landscape features,

centuries of painters left the sky blank and stressed the atmosphere's obscuring powers. Italy's far more limpid air helped nurture the high atmospheric visibility of her Renaissance paintings.

The prevailing climate is only one determining factor in the artists' choice of atmospheric setting. In every age, painters have, perhaps unwittingly, also used the sky as a mirror to our souls and a signpost of the times. The high visibility and small, well-chiseled clouds of the early Renaissance, an expansive age of discovery, gave way without any commensurate climate change to darkened and obscured stormy skies with wondrous optical phenomena in the more turbulent and pessimistic sixteenth century.

Because the sky is a reflection of the souls and times of the artists, it poses a severe litmus test for would-be imposters. In 1848, a group of British painters formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Their avowed intent was to restore to art the clarity of vision and presumed idealism of the fifteenth century, but their clouds and occasional rainbows betrayed non-Renaissance origins.

I began work on *The Soul of All Scenery* in the spring of 1978 while writing an introductory textbook in meteorology called *The Science and Wonders of the Atmosphere*. To research its brief section on meteorology in art and learn how the great artists painted the sky, I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That day I found a new love. At first I judged my love harshly with the parochial eye of a textbook meteorologist, looking for distinct, classical cloud forms. Gradually, it dawned on me that the artists, with their heightened visual sensitivities, sometimes had a deep feeling for aerial viewpoints I was unaware of. Patiently, they taught me to be a better observer of the sky and of beauty in general.

I have derived immense pleasure from researching and writing *The Soul of All Scenery*. It has given me an opportunity to meet and learn from some of the most remarkable human beings that ever lived. I am both humbled and exalted by my encounter with genius and profound accomplishment.