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book review of

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by Julia A. Sienkewicz

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Epic Landscapes: Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the Art of Watercolor by Julia A. Sienkewicz

Reviewed by Kathleen A. Foster

Julia A. Sienkewicz,
Epic Landscapes: Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the Art of Watercolor.
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Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1820) is justly celebrated as the first professional architect in the United States. British-born (with a Pennsylvania mother), he brought an austere, progressive neoclassicism to the designs of the Bank of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the Capitol building in Washington, and Baltimore’s majestic cathedral. A transatlantic intellectual and enlightenment polymath expert in engineering, natural sciences, and classical literature, Latrobe had a wide network of influential friends and clients; he planned numerous churches, schools, and private homes in Grecian or Gothic revival style, designed an influential renovation of Philadelphia’s waterworks, and left a legacy of important students who ensured his place in the country’s architectural history. The scholarship devoted to his work is impressive. Building on Talbot Hamlin’s ground-breaking biography in 1955, the Maryland Historical Society systematically published Latrobe’s correspondence, journals, and drawings (including fourteen sketchbooks, to a total of some 350 images) in multiple volumes beginning in the 1970s, led by Edward C. Carter II, with the assistance of John C. Van Horne, and Lee W. Formwalt.^[1] This campaign included *Latrobe’s View of America, 1795–1820, Selections from the Watercolors and Sketches*, edited by Carter, Van Horne, and Charles E. Brownell in 1985 and still the most useful introduction to his art.^[2] Subsequently Jeffrey A. Cohen and Brownell comprehensively treated the architectural and engineering drawings, and more recently Michael Fazio and Patrick Snadon focused on Latrobe’s domestic architecture.^[3]

Julia A. Sienkewicz argues that all these worthy scholars have underestimated a key period in Latrobe's career—his first three years in the United States, in Virginia from 1796 to 1798, prior to his relocation to Philadelphia—and underrated a rich source for understanding his mind: his watercolors. She blames this lack of attention to disciplinary boxes and national borders: some have dismissed his watercolors as British and not properly part of a North American or US story, and many have shrugged him off as an amateur, working in a secondary medium. Indeed, most of the scholarship has been driven by those interested in the development of his architectural practice, who tend to see through the drawings to real or imagined buildings. To architectural historians, the Virginia years were a time of literal and metaphorical wandering, a prologue to Latrobe's real career. Struggling to get a professional footing, Latrobe had few commissions and produced mostly "fancies"—some of questionable structural feasibility—in addition to landscapes and a few puzzling trompe l'oeil still lifes. To architectural historians, the watercolors of this period serve mostly as records of Latrobe's sources, his idleness, and his immaturity, yielding inklings of his future greatness. Sienkewicz asks them—and us—to look again, and judge these works as watercolors, as paintings, and as records of Latrobe's singular mind at a critical—even excruciating—period in his life.

Describing the work of this time as his "immigration series," Sienkewicz finds an autobiographical narrative of melancholy and insecurity threading through many of the early works, gradually giving way to greater confidence. The newly-widowed and bankrupt Latrobe found himself in a new landscape in 1796, far from his two children, understandably depressed and lonely, and struggling to find a place in his mother's homeland. In Virginia, where persons of his education and international sophistication were scarce and professional architects even scarcer, he floundered seeking an identity and sense of purpose, not to mention an income. In a decade of turmoil—the 1790s—when both the new nation and its European parent countries were roiled by change and overheated political discourse, he was torn by hopes for the future of the United States and depressed by a vision of the inevitability of failure seen in cycles of world history.

Gathering the poetic, learned, and introspective texts of Latrobe's own journals, Sienkewicz lays them alongside these early watercolors and presses to find many layers of meaning, ultimately seeking to understand his mind and his creative process. Her mission is given license by the wide-ranging character of Latrobe's education and his own love of allegory and symbol, which offers many realms of erudition to explore and interpret. Trained for the ministry under the supervision of his father, a leader of the Moravian Church in England, Latrobe had a classical education that shines through all his work—on paper and in architecture. Sienkewicz learnedly pursues the references to classical literature; her title, *Epic Landscapes*, conjures the literary tradition of the epic, or the hero's journey. Latrobe's ability to quote from Latin extemporaneously invites Sienkewicz to press harder on his experience of classical literature, seeking models in the heroes of Vergil and Horace that Latrobe evidently knew. From the outset of his journey, Latrobe saw himself as the hero of his own story, swiftly finding parallels between ancient and modern times, and alive to the auspiciousness of his own journey and its potentially tragic outcome. This dramatic sense of history, ancient and modern, personal and international, as well as his own internal war of insecurity and ambition, depression and self-confidence, is clearly read in his journals. Using

cues from his texts, Sienkewicz finds these same messages in the watercolors and builds a visual dimension to Latrobe's written record.

The epic theme is stated in the first chapter, "Atlantic Purgatory," which investigates the sketchbook filled during Latrobe's excruciating four-month crossing on the *Eliza* from December 1795 to March 1796. Beginning the title page with a quotation from Vergil's *Aeneid*, Latrobe casts himself in the role of the wandering Aeneas, destined to found a new empire at Rome, but not before suffering many obstacles. Indeed, the *Eliza* was blown off course and eventually ran short of food and water, making the voyage an ordeal for Latrobe, who distracted himself by preparing one of his better-known trompe l'oeil watercolors. His *Breakfast Equipage* depicts the ship's maggot-ridden breakfast spread as if painted on a page unfurled over an assemblage of playing cards and manuscripts. More than an exercise in wit, this image is a projection of Latrobe's frustration, anxiety, and depression during this miserable journey. Views of England and the coast of Virginia illustrate what was left behind and what lay ahead, establishing Latrobe's sense of displacement, homesickness, and apprehension. Marine views of the *Eliza* in a storm and off the coast of Virginia, clearly projected in the imagination (as the artist was on board), call for more discussion—what are the visual sources of this imaginative marine-painting tradition? Tellingly, the author cites a passage from Vergil describing a storm, not a visual antecedent.

Such inspiration from contemporary art might have been included in chapter 2, "Latrobe in a European Context," which backtracks to describe Latrobe's extraordinary European education. His Moravian background has been understudied, according to the author, because of the destruction of documents, the inaccessibility of archives, the language barrier, discomfort with religious content, or the blinders that define Latrobe as either British or North American. Latrobe did cast off his Moravian faith as a young man, and there is little Christian content in his watercolors, but he was raised communally in a Moravian community near Leeds in Yorkshire in a fashion that surely shaped his character. He learned to draw (and probably paint in watercolors) as a boy by copying prints—certainly an education in compositional conventions that might have introduced him to the stormy seascapes of Vernet or Louthembourg, not to mention the classical landscapes of Claude Lorrain. Sent at the age of twelve to a seminary in Niesky (now in Poland) for more advanced education, he encountered there a sophisticated central European community of artists. The romantic landscape themes of this group, cultivated on sketching tours, shaped his aesthetic as well as his practice in watercolor, although only replicas from 1798 survive to represent this early work, and more examples of the watercolors from this circle would help distinguish their influence apart from English practice. Nonetheless, the author's scrutiny of the circle of artists and friends known in this period throws new light on his extraordinary education as well as his comfort in watercolor as a traveler's medium.

Latrobe returned to England in 1783 after separating from the Moravian Church, gradually building a social network in London as he pursued a career in architecture. Suddenly, watercolor became a professional tool, necessary to the cultivation, development, and execution of projects. His early architectural renderings, also rarely studied, are examined in the context of the topographical watercolor, brought to a higher status in mid-eighteenth-century England by artists such as Paul Sandby. For the first time, Sienkewicz argues, we see Latrobe seeking to combine the "professional" drafting style of an architectural rendering

with the naturalistic detail and picturesque compositional strategies of an accomplished “amateur” landscape watercolorist (65).

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate a selection of his Virginia landscape watercolors, first “A Solitary Traveler in the American Woods,” and then “Learning to Read the Stones.” The theme of immigration from the first chapter returns as we follow Latrobe exploring his strange new country. As before, the connecting thread is melancholy, as he tours the ruins of various sites devastated during the Revolutionary War. After twenty years, the scars were still raw, bringing to life the destruction of warfare that continued to threaten Europe in the 1790s. Latrobe casts a cold eye on these ruins, finding little heroism and glory in the sites of national history. Convincingly, Sienkewicz sorts through the tangle of thoughts and emotions that must have accompanied these watercolors as the mourning Latrobe pondered the fall of earlier empires and the unstable future of the United States.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 study closely three “booklets” of text and watercolors assembled by Latrobe between 1797 and 1799. All three are important productions, deserving of the close study given to their content. Although the author’s discussion is slow-going and occasionally repetitious, I applaud the rare patience to thoroughly examine each watercolor with care, commenting on the order of the images and any lost parts, and considering each booklet as a total work. The best known of the three, comprising Latrobe’s two-part “Essay on Landscape,” might sound like a project for publication, and many of the watercolors in this project are among his most beautiful. In fact, it was an illustrated instructional text prepared as a parting gift for a young female student. Personal, somewhat disorganized, often diaristic and autobiographical, it is a sequence of anecdotes and advice almost amounting, as Sienkewicz says, to a manifesto of Latrobe’s artistic project considering the artistic potential of the US landscape. Anticipating the approach of Thomas Cole in the 1830s, Latrobe puts landscape subjects above history painting in the hierarchy of genres because they contain lessons from nature superior to the moral learning gained from the actions of humankind. He also advocates for watercolor as an appropriate medium, and includes many examples (such as a recreated Silesian landscape, or remembered English views) illustrating “Stage Tricks for Landscape.” These “knacks,” including compositional devices (framing trees, shadows, etc.) offer a catalogue of artistic strategies for shaping a landscape subject into a picturesque image. Ever insisting on truthfulness and disparaging of artists who doctor their scenes to make them more attractive, Latrobe nonetheless advocates artistic “licenses” to improve the effect of a painting.

Latrobe’s manipulations seem to be forgotten by Sienkewicz as she analyzes his “serial landscapes” in chapter 5—including three watercolors of Washington’s Mount Vernon, for example—that make internal references to each other, including landmarks (or trees) that allow the earnest viewer to travel across the site, from drawing to drawing, assembling an overall experience. The views back and forth across the lawn at Mount Vernon do not exactly match up, however, as Latrobe’s framing trees, with their long shadows, seem more Claudian “knack” than faithful observation. A tendency to take these watercolors too literally should be chastened by remembering that while the underlying pencil sketch and some neutral washes may have been made on the spot, the coloring and detail was very likely done later, in the comfort of an interior, when memory began to fail and artistic judgment was allowed to improve on the scene. Sienkewicz pursues the journey across these “serial landscapes” as if

they are games offered by Latrobe to tease a hypothetical viewer, and indeed it is a pleasure to follow his path, though it must be remembered that his first audience was always himself. Latrobe does not seem to have harbored plans to engrave and publish his views, as many other visiting travelers would do. The exercise of sketching outdoors was meant to sharpen observation and appreciation of the scene in the moment, record the impression, and engrave the appearance of the site in one's memory. Secondarily, it was an aide-memoire to be reviewed later, to refresh that picture in the mind, and share with others.

The other two booklets have a more outward-facing identity, as they were prepared to persuade or tempt Latrobe's architectural clients. His beautiful designs for a theater complex have been faulted as structurally impossible; Sienkewicz argues that they were never intended as engineering drawings, but were meant as promotional pieces, to entice investors with an animated vision of the project while marketing his own exotic status as professional architect and "cosmopolitan artist-intellectual" (164). As both designer and renderer—combining tasks usually handled separately in an architectural firm—he was able to indulge his fantasies. The frontispiece to this set of watercolors is another extraordinary composition, like the earlier *Breakfast* still life, cataloguing the possessions of the theater company hoping to occupy this new building. Obsessively detailed with insider information, it is another demonstration of the solace and pleasure Latrobe found in escaping into the production of watercolors.

This sense of fantasy pervades the third booklet of what Latrobe described as his "castles in the air," containing a series of watercolors of imagined buildings, also meant to impress potential clients. Again, these renderings are infused with narratives suggested by hypothetical occupants or décor generally not seen in architectural renderings. The doll-house complexity of these drawings with their charming, unnecessary detail speaks to the time

Latrobe banked into these watercolors—time that he would never have in later practice—and the mix of cocky self-promotion and moody insecurity that fueled his imagination.

The final chapter is devoted to Latrobe's enigmatic trompe l'oeil images, returning to the obsessive ship-board breakfast still life and four others that present the same "deception"—to use the period term—of a watercolor (or two, or three) lying on top of other papers. More than any other watercolors in this book, these are read by Sienkewicz as autobiographical, perhaps because they are all so intense, so time-consuming and therefore psychologically immersive, and so bafflingly private. Every one represents a conceptual paradox, of a facsimile manuscript below picturesque compositions that seem to bear no relation to the text. Sienkewicz bravely analyzes these, admitting that here, in the absence of commentary from Latrobe, interpretation remains speculative. What they do make transparent is the complexity of Latrobe's mind, his love of buried, private associations, his elusive sense of humor, and his patience with such fine work.

Throughout the book, Sienkewicz argues for the potency of watercolor as Latrobe's principal medium as a painter, and she occasionally comments briefly on the "avant-garde" status of the medium and his content. However, there is relatively little discussion of the watercolor-ness of his work, or of style, or of the material, technical qualities of the medium. The analytical framework of this book is basically iconographic, psychological, and literary

—describing and unpacking the subject matter of each image with care, and developing its meaning to Latrobe with heavy dependence on his texts. The physical properties of the watercolors are unimportant; the size of the objects and the quality of the paper is nowhere mentioned. In some cases, this makes comparing the sketch for a work with its final version hard (as both are reproduced at the same size), but in a general sense the sketchbook scale of Latrobe's work needs to be reiterated, as it affects its impact in person, and says something about the intimacy of the imagery and the way it was shared with others. As mentioned above, there is little discussion of Latrobe's actual sketching practice—how much in the field, how much in the studio?—and the meaning of that method. In many respects, there is more to learn about the technique and materials of Latrobe's watercolors from Charles Brownell's brief essay in *Latrobe's America* from 1985.^[4]

Similarly, there is very little judgment of Latrobe's style or his abilities as a draftsman, and few comparative references to contemporary watercolorists or eighteenth-century sources. The comparison to Sandby's much-earlier work is distant; they share a love of ruins and a sense of composition and detail, but show very different styles, and the discussion would be richer using more contemporary, romantic examples. The author's insightful discussion of many of his landscapes as paired—sunlight and moonlight, storm and calm—does not note this as a convention established by Claude and popular with landscape painters well into the 1800s. Latrobe's well-known dependence on figures from John Flaxman's illustrations is interpreted at sometimes undue length on the basis of the meaning of the story and characters from which the figures are borrowed, without mentioning the convenience of found solutions. Latrobe never studied figure drawing, and was often awkward with such subjects; Flaxman's figures, as Brownell notes, were a useful and stylish assist.^[5] This lack of interest in the making of the watercolors themselves and their physical properties led me to note that, in many contexts, the word "watercolor" could be easily exchanged for "drawing" or "painting."

All of which made me wish for more discussion of "why watercolor?" What was it about watercolor that suited Latrobe's project? The elementary fact that Latrobe was taught, like most upper-class children in Britain, to paint in watercolor is not examined; his use of it as a sketch medium on jaunts with his friends at the seminary is only briefly developed. For both children and adults, the practice of drawing was about disciplined observation as well as hand skills and aesthetics; sketching outdoors taught lessons about nature, and—for those primed by William Gilpin's lessons on picturesque—helped develop a sense of the art in landscape. In England, watercolor became the language of art education and scenic tourism, both foundational to Latrobe's work and his "Essay on Landscape." Cheap, portable, clean and relatively fast, it was the traveler's boon, the starving or experimental artist's friend. A step back to consider this social history of watercolor would ground Latrobe's work in a wider context and explain his choice of the medium.

In this direction, the author mentions the "amateur" practices of children and tourists—and the label "amateur" is noted as a damper to Latrobe's modern reputation as a painter (11, 256)—without a very rousing defense of the meaning and status of "gentleman amateur" in this period, when many fine, adventuresome, and highly respected British watercolorists were amateurs. Most persons of Latrobe's class (a gentleman) would decline the lower, insecure status of "professional artist," and few such gentlemen amateurs painted in oil, or

attempted complex figure painting. As a gentleman and a watercolorist, Latrobe was also to some extent freed from professional expectations, and licensed to experiment in personal and unconventional ways.

This special class culture for watercolor also connects to the rising prestige of the medium in late eighteenth-century Britain. Although Sienkewicz mentions watercolor as an “avant-garde” choice, her meaning is not clear (and the example of Turner and Girtin she cites is still to come), and the British pride in watercolor as a national idiom is not articulated.^[6] Carrying this baggage concerning watercolor—its social position, its national identity—Latrobe then found himself in a country where watercolor had no national prestige or “avant-garde” significance; it was the realm of cartographers, printmakers, engineers, and architects—all barely recognized as artists. Sienkewicz is astute in noting Latrobe’s innovative merging of these different classes of watercolor or drawing—the professional architectural rendering, the topographical view, the picturesque sketch, and the Flaxmanesque antiquarian illustration. The fact that this fusion took place, unrecognized, in a vacuum in Virginia adds an interesting spin: how would this work look against practice in London? Is it possible that the loneliness and freedom of these Virginia years allowed a new, “American” cross-over practice that never would have been tolerated in England?

Such a reconstruction of a richer context for Latrobe’s choice of watercolor only reiterates his isolation in these years, and the solitary, introspective quality of his work that Sienkewicz analyzes so well. She understands the private, intensely personal quality of his images, even the ones intended to impress potential clients, and how they served as therapy for Latrobe at a time when he was underemployed, frustrated, confused, and depressed. Times would change for him after winning the commission for the Bank of Pennsylvania and moving to Philadelphia in 1798, and Sienkewicz outlines the many reasons why his work in watercolor drops off and changes after that year. Never again would Latrobe have time on his hands to produce such wrought objects as his three handmade booklets, or his five elusive “deceptions.” Reading many of these images as soul-searching, aspirational, self-promoting, and fanciful, Sienkewicz explores a rare mind at work. Her book opens new insights into a complex man whose mind, as revealed in his watercolors, expressed the creative turmoil of an artist determined to shape the painted as well as the built landscape of the United States.

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Notes

[1] The trove of Latrobe’s papers at the Maryland Historical Society inspired the praiseworthy campaign to publish the entire collection, but it may be that this concentration of his work did not serve his reputation as an artist, as the work was rarely seen outside of Baltimore, or in an art museum context. The fact that many of the watercolors are bound in sketchbooks has also reduced their display and circulation.

[2] *Latrobe's View of America, 1795–1820, Selections from the Watercolors and Sketches*, eds. Edward C. Carter II, John C. Van Horne, and Charles E. Brownell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press for the Maryland Historical Society, 1985).

[3] Jeffrey A. Cohen and Charles E. Brownell, *The Architectural Drawings of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, Vol. 2: Part I and II. *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, Series II: *The Architectural and Engineering Drawings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press for the Maryland Historical Society and the American Philosophical Society, 1994). Michael Fazio and Patrick Snadon, *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[4] In “An Introduction to the Art of Latrobe’s Drawings,” in *Latrobe's View of America, 1795–1820, Selections from the Watercolors and Sketches*, 17–40.

[5] *Ibid.*, 31–32.

[6] Watercolor as an “avant-garde” medium is discussed on pp. 143 and 195; the author discusses Turner’s project to advance the status of watercolor in England in the mid-1790s, 75–76.