

‘Reality and Symbol’

By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

Posted at 7:01 AM

BOSTON - Find a landscape that you love. Go there, and look carefully.

You won't just see the fields, or the trees, or the ocean. You'll experience your feelings, your personal history - your ideas will spring forth from the environment. You'll encounter the many facets that make up memory, personality and consciousness.

Landscape painters have explored this for centuries, turning a pleasant (or sometimes unpleasant) scene into a cauldron of ideas and suggestions. In a carefully curated exhibition at Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art, "Nature's Mirror" explores how Belgian artists have investigated their own fascinating environment over the course of more than five centuries.

We can't look at the world without being overwhelmed by ideas. A host of Belgian artists have shown this, turning landscapes into experiences that explore personal relationships, societal changes, and most especially, changes in the art world.

From practical changes like the growth of a broad, popular market for art, to philosophical ones like the influences of realism and symbolism, "Nature's Mirror" unpretentiously explores these sweeping developments.

More than 120 works, on display throughout the renovated Daley Family Gallery, quietly capture the bold drama of ideas that passed through Belgium from the Renaissance through to the modern era.

In simplest terms, at the beginning you have the allegorical works of Pieter Breugel, or Hieronymus Cock. And at the end you have the evocative, modern symbols of Fernand Khnopff and Léon Silliaert. But it's the story that unfolds between those two Belgians that makes the tale worth following.

Printmaking begins the story. The practical developments that made putting etched materials on paper possible allowed for greater dissemination of artworks. Artists like Dürer and Cock not only captured scenes from Belgian life, but imbued many of those works with biblical or allegorical messages, and found a wide audience.

The introductory galleries of “Nature’s Mirror” focus on the three-part teamwork involved in printmaking: artist, engraver and publisher, each in turn bringing creative energy to the new method of reaching a broader public.

By the 18th century, responses to modern industrialization appeared, coupled with a response to Belgium’s independence in 1830. Depictions of harsh working conditions sit side-by-side with lush, peaceful vistas.

Representative artists from the rural School of Tervuren, the Belgian equivalent of the French Barbizon School, focused their attention on romanticized views of the peaceful countryside, turning their backs on rapidly growing urban lifestyles.

Some of the most evocative paintings in “Nature’s Mirror” come from the turn of the 20th century. These herald not only the rise of powerful artistic movements like symbolism and impressionism, but also the advent of the first World War, which razed the Belgian landscape.

Here we see deeply psychological creations. Works that not only suggest the landscape, but also invade the personal psyches of the subjects. In these galleries curator Jeffrey Howe’s notion of landscape as mirror comes to life, with street-lamps, bridges and vistas blossoming in interpretive possibilities.

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