“Here the painter can find rare and beautiful subjects for his brush,” exclaimed Adrien Van der Donk of the highlands of the Hudson River in 1654. The only pity is that there were seemingly no landscape painters to rally to Van der Donk’s rhetorical summons. One may search high and low for landscape in seventeenth-century colonial painting and be rewarded with only an occasional portrait whose background has a snatch of an imaginary landscape vista. And yet the seventeenth-century house was not entirely without pictures. In 1688 Samuel Sewall, the Boston diarist, visiting a friend, saw some “Landscips of Oxford Colledges and Halls,” and in Virginia in 1690 David Fox willed “three pictures in the parlor and twenty-five pictures of scenes in the hall.” These “pictures” and “landscips” were probably engravings, which after 1700 were regularly advertised in colonial newspapers.

Just when the first painted landscapes appeared in the colonies we can only guess. At the very beginning the rigors of settlement in America and the austerity of Puritanism did little to nurture a formal art expression. Landscape painting, however, had certainly begun to gain ground in the colonies in the years after 1700, and it is clear now that the artists of the eighteenth century produced more landscapes than was once thought to be the case. Many of these were painted on paneled walls and have been inaccessible while others have been redeemed from an incorrect attribution to European artists.

Interestingly enough, the first account of an American landscape painter comes from Puritan Boston in 1740 when the New England Journal announced the death of the thirty-six-year-old Nathaniel Emmons. “He was universally own’d to be the greatest master of various Sorts of Painting that ever was born in this Country. And his excellent Works were the pure Effect of his own Genius, without receiving any Instructions from others.” The obituary goes on to mention his “Rivers, Banks and Rural Scenes,” none of which, apparently, have survived. But we do have landscapes painted in Boston around the same time in the house built by Thomas Clark after 1711. This house was one of the first in Boston to be decked out in the “new” Georgian style. Its three-story façade and broken-scroll doorway pediment were matched inside by elaborate paneling that covered the four walls of the principal room and provided a perfect surface for the painter’s brush. Only a few of the original panels have survived, and of these

ABOVE: The South East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia, by Peter Cooper, about 1720. View from the Delaware River. Oil on canvas. Lent by the Free Library of Philadelphia
two appear in the current exhibition of eighteenth-century landscape painting in the American Wing. The treatment of the subject matter of the wall panel, a rider approaching an inn, is sufficiently British to suggest that the painter was a relatively skilled Englishman who had migrated to the colonies or was working here during a brief sojourn.

In the overmantel panel which shows the Clark House itself the large scale of the building, the small size of the foreground figures, and the subordination of the landscape make it clear that the purpose of this painting was to display the lineaments of the owner's house as a limner might display the features of his face. Whether it served as the major element in a composition or was made to share in the over-all setting, the “portrait of the house” became one of the staple commissions of the painter during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

From this time on there was no dearth of landscape painting if we can trust the contemporary advertisements. Alexander Stewart, for example, announced in Philadelphia in 1769 that he would paint “Landskips, sea pieces, perspective views of gentlemens country seats, &c.” for those who had “picture panels over their chimney pieces, or on the sides of their rooms, standing empty.” Another advertiser, James L. Walker of Baltimore, proposed in 1792 to paint landscapes “either from Nature or Fancy,” together with “Chimney Screens,” the latter being an oblong panel designed to close the fireplace in the summer.

The setting of the painted panels was the actual woodwork of the room, as illustrated in the Marmion Room of the American Wing, from an eighteenth-century house in Virginia. The stiles and rails which hold the large panels in place, as well as the decorative moldings of the room, have been painted to simulate elaborate wood grain or marble, a popular eighteenth-century technique. The wall panels themselves are filled with figures and cottages and castles, or with arabesques, swags, urns, cornucopias, and busts. Over the fireplace is a composition of castles and windmills and classical ruins with a romantic view into a distant sun-bathed harbor, all more or less in the tradition of Claude Lorrain. Claude was by no means unknown in Virginia, incidentally. George Washington wrote to England in 1757 asking for “A Neat Landscape after Claude Lorrain . . . £3.15.6.”

One often finds the subject in the “house portrait” surrounded with an unpredictable variety of embellishments that carries us back in thought to James Walker's statement that he worked from Nature or from Fancy. Along with the very factual views of the Thomas Hancock House in Boston, about 1781, and an overmantel painting from a house in Fairfield, Connecticut, there is one panel in the exhibition with a farm and a mansion house which introduces a note of pure fanciful delight in the row of foreground figures spaced with exaggerated care and playing upon the viol and oboe or making love.

Almost as popular as the “house portrait” were the views of whole villages or village streets, often generalized in treatment. Occasionally, as in one village shown in the exhibition, perhaps near Salem, the painter went to great pains to reproduce a local panorama set before his eyes. The carefully noted individuality of each building gives the picture a camera-like quality which differs from many other village scenes where irregularities are eliminated, and one sees instead a child's garden of play-block houses and churches. And few of these paintings achieve the sophisticated pastoral quality of the two views of Baltimore by the European-born Francis Guy and George Beck. Guy, who began his painting career in this country by copying the pictures which belonged to a Baltimore collector, sketched his view from Beech Hill. Beck set up his easel in Howard Park. In both pictures the city is subordinate to the landscape, which unfolds with convincing perspective, a rather rare ingredient of eighteenth-century landscape painting.

There was always a fascination with rivers and the sea. Both Peter Cooper in his view of Philadelphia, about 1720, and the unknown artist who painted the Southeast Prospect of New York City about 1760 sketched their cities
from off shore. One advantage was the way in which these views, perhaps intentionally, permitted the introduction of vessels of every kind. As a matter of fact, there was hardly a landscape showing either a river or a distant marine view that did not include ships. Few of these, however, can match the piquancy of the “fish story” showing a huge fish on the surface of the water, painted on wood and inscribed by the artist: “March 8, 1736. 4 foot Long. 2 foot Round. and 35 Pounds. NB. without the Spawn.”

Finally there are scenes of the hunt or of wild animals. At least two panels in the exhibition show riders and hounds racing through a conventional rolling landscape in full pursuit of the fox. In one of these the artist, working neither from nature nor from pure fancy, has copied his scene from an engraving by James Seymour, the eighteenth-century English sporting painter. Similarly, the landscape from Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, with its architectural ruins and rustic crosses, is taken literally from an engraving by Frederick Hendrik Vanden Hove, in an English publication of 1685.

The eighteenth-century landscape painters do not fall into any one or two convenient classifications. Perhaps at the very top was the well-known painter Benjamin West, an American-born artist who became president of the Royal Academy in London. His Landscape with Cow, painted about 1748-1749 before he went abroad, reveals the familiar pattern of the fanciful landscape, inspired probably by prints, but there are details, such as the cow, that reflect his use of the camera obscura, an optical device that throws a little image in a darkened box. West made one of these for himself and wrote, “My delight was then to go to farmyards, and by means of my camera, draw the cattle, etc.”

While West, and later Copley, went abroad to paint we know from various sources that the woods must have been full of Europeans who had reversed the process. Joseph Perovani and Jacint Cocchi, “of the republic of Venice, Painters,” advertised in Philadelphia in 1795 that they had left Italy “to try to satisfy the
respectable citizens of America." Anthony Audin, "Painter from Paris," advertised in 1791 that he was settling in Charleston, while from England came George Beck, Francis Guy, and William Williams, originally a seaman, who painted the Denning family, and from Naples in 1799 the artist Michele Felice Corné. We must be cautious, however, of the native painter like Christian Rennick, who, born in 1726 in Eastham, Massachusetts, wrote himself down at one point as "late of Spain," obviously seeking to enhance his prestige with an exaggerated claim to a foreign background.

There is more than one hint in the advertisements of the immediate sources of inspiration that flowed into America at the hands of the immigrant artists. J. Stevenson, for instance, promised to paint landscapes "in the Stile of Zoffani," a German artist popular in mid-eighteenth-century England, while John Winter in Philadelphia offered for sale in 1771 a painting "representing the evening, painted after the manner of Pusine," together with "a set of six small landscapes," done by the Italian artist Zuccarelli "in London." By the end of the century the range had widened even farther, and artist and layman alike could visit Edward Savage's Columbian Gallery advertised in Philadelphia in 1796, "containing a large collection of ancient and modern Paintings and Prints."

Not all the landscape artists of the eighteenth century had strong contacts with European painting. Winthrop Chandler and Ralph Earl, both represented in the exhibition, were native American painters, working wherever customers demanded their simple and forthright painterly statements of fact. They were hardly to be confused with the urban artist who boasted of his European training and tried to supply the well-to-do of the coastal cities with fashionable copies of whatever was au courant abroad.

Whatever the competence of such painters as


Jonathan Edes and Peter Cooper, we know very little about them, and it is significant that these men, along with many unknown "masters" represented in the exhibition, were as a rule recognized by their contemporaries only as artisans. William Dunlap, whose roster of American artists in 1834 forms one of the foundation stones of our knowledge of early American painting, does not mention these men although he must have known some of them personally or at least seen their work. Often these unsung "limners" were jacks of all trades. In the eyes of the ordinary mortal, as Nina Fletcher Little has pointed out, they may have seemed like mysterious vagrants, appearing and disappearing at will from, and to, an unannounced destination. They painted di-
Harbor town, painted about 1795. Overmantel panel by an unknown artist. From the house of Joshua Meriam in North Oxford, Massachusetts. Lent by the Worcester Historical Society directly and naively with a curious intermingling of observation and formula, falling back ultimately upon traditional pictorial conventions that exist wherever one finds an absence of schools and academies. Whatever there is of the "grand manner" in their work comes at second or third hand, often not at all, making of these pieces a refreshing counterpart to the work of their more self-conscious contemporaries trained in a formal manner. "It was hard for a Colonial, who had never seen the Campagna or any castle," writes James Flexner, "to get the formulas right." He was above all an individual. It is his personal treatment of what he received in one way or another from abroad, coupled with his own shrewd observation, that makes these landscape paintings a part of a broad European tradition and yet elevates them to the realm of the delightfully unique.

View of Bennington, Vermont, by Ralph Earl. Painted about 1796-1798. The artist can be seen sketching in the lower left-hand corner. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. George Dobbin Penniman
Engraving by Frederick Hendrik Van den Hove, reproduced from plate 21 of William Salomon's Polygraphice (London, fifth edition, 1685), from which the landscape below was copied. Engravings were a popular source of inspiration in xviii century American landscape painting.

Landscape with wayside crosses. Overmantel panel, probably painted before 1775. The artist is unknown. From an unidentified house near Morgantown, Pennsylvania. Jessup Fund, 1934