

As the companion to the J. Paul Getty Museum’s 2012 exhibition, In Focus: Picturing Landscape, Landscape in Photographs is a slim but not slight book, providing a broad, cogent overview of landscape photography’s history at the nexus of shifting environmental concerns and technological developments. Authors and curators Hellman and Abbott chart a path from the first appearance of the camera obscura to the conceptual, postmodern, and critical, revealing how the landscape subject has reflected changes in the medium and society.

With a short introductory essay followed by seventy-three well-chosen, glossy, full-color plates—all photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum collection—this is essentially a fantastic illustrated lecture in book form. Throughout the plates, sporadic commentary guides the reader through the thematically and roughly chronologically-presented images. Ideally, additional interpretive information might be offered for each of the photos, but this would come at the expense of the book’s modest and elegant design. While most of the photographers whose work is included are appropriately obvious choices, such as Gustave Le Gray, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, etc., there are some more surprising and equally relevant choices, as well, reflecting the breadth of the Getty’s collection.

As an introductory text, the ideas, works, and artists presented in Landscape in Photographs will certainly be far more extensively explored in any number of books and other resources held by a museum or academic art library, but it is an exceptionally lucid and well-illustrated orientation to its subject. As such, this book may be most valuable, though perhaps not essential, as an addition to collections supporting undergraduate students of photography and art history, and an excellent addition to many public library collections.

Moving from the general and introductory to the specific and exploratory, Sense of Place: European Landscape Photography takes the relationship between landscape and national identity as its subject. Edited by guest curator and professor Liz Wells of the University of Plymouth, UK, Sense of Place presents the work of forty-one contemporary European landscape photographers, from the twenty-seven European Union nations, organized geographically into six regional groupings. The photographers represented include preeminent figures, like Andreas Gursky and Olafur Eliasson, as well as some lesser-known artists.

The catalog is a handsome book, with its wide, thick pages, clean design, orderly bilingual (English and German) text, and beautiful full-color illustrations, although there are some minor design flaws. Photo captions are provided in tiny font in the insides margins, making
them difficult to consult without breaking the binding in time, although there is a visual list of objects provided at the end of the book, as well.

Tackling the question of whether a cohesive identity—a sense of ‘home’—can be experienced by citizens of the European Union as a whole, given the distinct cultures and varied terrain it contains, Wells asserts, “Stories can turn spaces into places.” The complex story of Europe requires assembling a multiplicity of perspectives, and each of the six regional groupings in the book opens with an essay from a regional authority—curators, scholars, editors, and theorists among them. With a foreword by Herman Von Rompuy, President of the European Council, and a final essay by Wells (accompanied by a fine but limited bibliography), the tone is varied. Most of the text assumes an academic involvement and familiarity with art historical concepts and critical theory, with some of the contributors taking more poetic, expressive approaches.

This is a timely and fascinating collection of photographic works in a period of geo-political flux and the ever-increasing need for people to reckon with human ecological impact and their interaction with the natural world. Although most essential for museum and academic libraries serving art and design students, Sense of Place would also be a worthy addition to many larger public and special library collections.

Christina Benson, Photo Archivist, City of New York/Parks and Recreation, christina.benson@parks.nyc.gov.