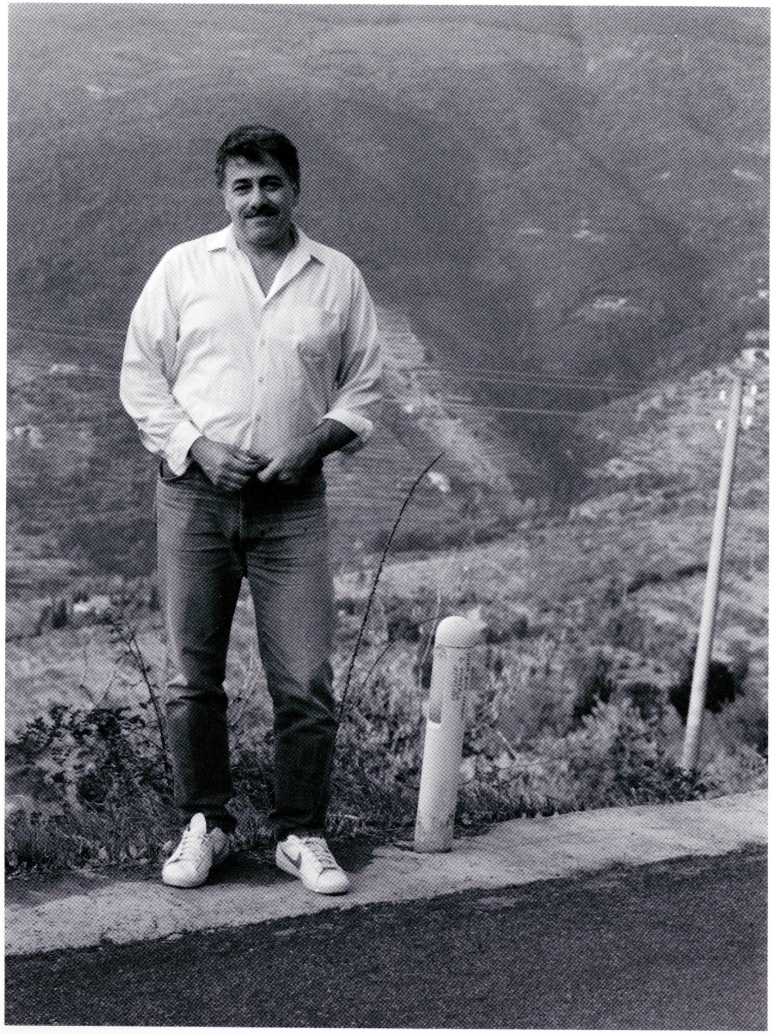
THE TUSCAN LANDSCAPES OF RICHARD UPTON

THE TUSCAN LANDSCAPES OF RICHARD UPTON



Richard Upton in Cortona

THE TUSCAN LANDSCAPES OF RICHARD UPTON

Essays by

Stanley I Grand

Fred Licht

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania
March 2–April 13, 1997

© Copyright 1997 Sordoni Art Gallery
All rights reserved

1500 copies were printed
by Llewellyn & McKane Inc.
Catalogue design by John Beck
Color photographs by Neil McGreevy
Cover photograph by Richard Upton
Set in Palatino with Avant Garde display

ISBN 0–942945–09–3

THE TUSCAN LANDSCAPES OF RICHARD UPTON

STANLEY I GRAND

Wilkes University

An old man dressed in a dusty black suit walks slowly up a long, winding incline to a spot overlooking a broad and fertile valley. Behind him stands a medieval castle, the Fortezza, which at 2130 feet above sea level is the highest point in Cortona. Climbing the step-like via San Cristoforo en route to the top of Monte Sant' Egidio, the rocky ridge on which the city clings, he passes Gino Severini's mosaic *Stations of the Cross*. Now, on this summer morning he can see the distant panorama of rolling hills, brown from the summer heat. Lake Trasimeno, which Hannibal's invading troops turned red with Legionaries' blood in 217 B.C., shimmers at the foot of the Apennines. In the middle distance he sees carefully demarcated fields, olive trees with their darkening, ripening fruit, umbrella pines and the stately cypresses. The whitewashed walls and ocher tile roofs of the Tuscan farm buildings appear like geometric punctuations in the landscape. Above, fair weather cumulus clouds drift by in an azure sky, while below the roads radiate outward from the ancient town walls—reminders that Cortona was once a proud Etruscan citadel. He ambles over to where Richard Upton paints on a small masonite panel, looks over the artist's shoulder and then back at the landscape. Wordlessly, he shakes his head and walks away.

Since his initial visit to Cortona in 1982, Richard Upton has returned every year, excepting only 1984 and 1994, to paint the surrounding countryside. He arrives with a stack of identical 8 x 10 inch gessoed panels. While in Cortona, he stays in the spartan visitors' quarters of a convent run by nuns. A strong element of ritual informs this long-lived series, which Upton acknowledges indirectly by retelling the story of Arshile Gorky compulsively scrubbing his floor before commencing to paint. The ritualistic, repetitive components of Upton's ongoing series of paintings—the annual return to the same locale; the small, unchanging format; the acceptance, even embracing, of a single subject—have assumed the unmistakable quality of a spiritual exercise. The paintings, linked together like

rosary beads, become a mantra for meditation. The careful delineation of boundaries is an essential component of this spiritual quest. He has observed that "relationships have to have boundaries but they also have to change . . . to evolve over time,"[1] since he believes that truth itself changes—or put another way, as Heraclitus might have—change is the only real truth. The very act of setting boundaries causes them to change while simultaneously opening new possibilities. To explore the constantly mutating, protean permutations requires a prolonged relationship and commitment like that which Upton has made to painting the countryside of Cortona. But his commitment is really inward.

Appropriately, working in a land where civilizations overlay each other like palimpsests, he sees himself akin to an excavator, an archaeologist, who slowly removes the obfuscating surface in order to reveal hidden meanings beneath the calm cultivated surface. Excavation, whether archaeological, psychological or spiritual, entails a sense of danger as the layers are removed and primary, atavistic forces are revealed. In a country noted for its adherence to the Catholic faith, Upton is in search of the original deities, the lares, who went underground like the protagonists in Anne Rice's novels or, better, in the short stories of H. P. Lovecraft.

As Upton's understanding of place has deepened, the paintings have undergone a change from works that clearly fit into the idealized, classic Italian landscape tradition [No. 1] to those more concerned with investigating the morphology of chaos [No. 23]. Describing the evolution of his Italian paintings, Upton has observed that initially they were concerned with "observing, analyzing, looking. At first they were perceptually based. But very quickly [the paintings] came to be more about *finding* and less about *seeing*."

Still he never allows what he knows to predominate over what he sees; indeed, he continues to work *plein-air* in front of the motif. Always fascinated with edges, boundaries and relationships, he views the optical and conceptual approaches as linked: "A constant dialectic exists in my paintings between the mind and the eye. Nonetheless, if I have to trust one when I'm working, I trust the eye because it's an informed eye." The tension between representation and abstraction, in other words, is essential to understanding Upton's Cortona landscape series. Unlike a Frank Stella painting, what you see is not what you get.

The paradigm shift from a detached, scientific protocol ("observing, analyzing, looking") to a subjective, intuitive and emotional approach is reflected in the formal characteristics of the work: the change in his palette, the substitution of abstract, allover compositions for representational paintings, the increasingly agitated brushwork and tactile surfaces, and the disorienting spatial manipulations. But, whatever the shifts in method, the commitment to investigate the meaning of landscape has remained the same.

The earliest paintings in this exhibition, executed during his 1982 and 1983 visits, reflect the Italian landscape tradition as evolved over centuries. This manner, which has had a strong affinity since the Renaissance with the pastoral ideal as formulated by such classical authors as Varro, Columella, Horace, and Virgil, portrays a concept of nature carefully husbanded and ordered for the benefit of man. Indeed, the present day view from the top of Monte Sant' Egidio conforms closely with one described by the Epicurean poet Lucretius: "fields . . . crops, and joyous vineyards, and a gray-green strip of olives to run in between and mark divisions, . . . adorned and

1. All quotations are from a conversation between the artist and author on June 14, 1995.

interspersed with pleasant fruits, and fenced by planting them all around with fruitful trees."[2] In a painting such as 83-7 [No. 2], we have a sense of a specific place observed. (Upton leaves his paintings untitled, preferring to assign an impersonal number that records each panel's year of creation and position within the series.) Natural recession, gentle transitions, brushwork and local color are used descriptively to delineate the boundaries of fields. Space is treated rationally, with a single controlling perspective. The painting is atmospheric with the suggestion of air interposed between the eye and distant fields. A rigorous geometry orders the painting, imposing a grid-like, linear structure on the composition.

Historically, the classic Italian landscape tradition represented a marked and decided break with the preceding model. In the medieval landscape, as Kenneth Clark reminds us in his pioneering study *Landscape into Art*, symbolic and religious meaning encode each object. Landscape consisted of arranging these symbolic objects rather than depicting light and space. The break with this theocentric view coincided with the rise of mercantile cities during the late middle ages and the shift away from ecclesiastical and feudal economies. Significantly, one of the earliest modern landscapes, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *The Effects of Good Government in the Country* (1338–1339), occurs in an urban, political setting—the Palazzo Pubblico or town hall in Siena, a short drive from Cortona.

Upton's initial acceptance of a rational tradition and his ultimate substitution of a subjective, chaotic one seems like a gradual descent into darkness, a closing in, a journey into the subconscious. As the pictorial and emotional balance between earth and sky gives way [No. 10], the latter is first constricted [No. 13] and then completely eliminated from the paintings. Upton has observed that the Italian paintings "began with sky and land but the horizon line continually rose as the land ascended into the sky; it's seeing the universe metaphorically—as heaven and earth—and creating a relationship between the two." The struggle to retain an equilibrium between the emotional aspects of earth and sky continues until 1988; thereafter, he relinquishes ether in favor of matter. (Interestingly, in his paintings and drawings from Ireland, where he has been working recently, sky predominates.)

In 1989, darker chthonian forces appear to take over [No. 15]. Upton fights this tendency by holding on to a semblance of structure. Much as the ancients imposed order on the landscape with their network of roads, he employs an organizing grid derived from the fence rows and highways that spread outward from the aerie that is Cortona. Nonetheless the paintings increasingly assume pinwheel compositions that spin or gyrate around a dark point in the composition, like a small airplane auguring into the ground [No. 16]. Boundaries shift and crack up, inducing vertigo, bringing to mind William Butler Yeats's oft quoted lament that "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Dionysian ecstacy struggles against Apollonian lucidity, as a riot of brushwork and color seeks to overwhelm the linear structure. In works such as 95-16 [No. 49], modulations in color value and shadow together create a competing pattern that moves the eye dizzyingly around the composition.

The artist's subversion of the rational Italian or Southern landscape might be seen as an embrace of the alternate, Northern tradition where ominous, threatening mists frequently hang in the thick branches of the dark piney forests. This wild, romantic, fantastic tradition—

2. Lucretius, *Titus Lucretius Carus on the Nature of Things*, trans. Thomas Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929): 198–199.

with its grotesque elements, barriers to entry, distortions, abrupt angles and mystery—is the antithesis of classicism. And this, perhaps, is at the core of what is so disconcerting about Upton's treatment of the Cortona countryside. Man is no longer the measure of all things; the light of reason has been veiled—if not extinguished. Yet the paintings' questioning of Enlightenment rationality, their lost confidence in progress and in science are what make them speak so clearly to our time.

Upton's pilgrimages to Cortona have deep roots and are part of an American tradition that reaches back to the Colonial era. Initially artists like Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley went to Italy to become fluent in the Grand Manner. Visits to Rome and Florence—facilitating access to their wealth of antique sculpture and High Renaissance-Baroque paintings—were a necessary component in the education of successful history painters. As Classicism increasingly gave way to Romanticism during the nineteenth century, artists and writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne—one thinks of "The Marble Faun"—found in Italy's ruins and long civilization new meanings and expressive elements lacking in their young homeland. As Modernism in turn superseded Romanticism, the timeless, pastoral, Arcadian landscape gave way to one more reflective of modern life. Paris and its environs replaced Italy as the preferred European destination for artists, whether European or American, and Italy fell out of favor. Upton's return to Italy reflects a characteristic habit of going his own way.

In sum, then, Upton has taken an essentially humanistic and rational tradition, turned it upside down, shaken it until the parts fall out and lie scattered on the floor. Not only does Upton confound expectations by his handling of the subject, but he does so as well in a number of other areas including scale, surface, brushwork, color, and pictorial space.

The scale of Upton's paintings may initially seem puzzling, even provocative. Combined with his rich, juicy paint, they seem closer to the jeweler's workshop than to the painter's landscape tradition. The ridges of paint in the later works [No. 34] remind us of cloisonné or enamel work. His paintings almost disappoint us initially; they seem too precious because we expect our landscapes to possess a certain scale or monumentality appropriate to nature's scope, sweep, and range.

Upton, however, is well aware that his decision to paint on a small scale willfully rejects a view prevalent during the heyday of the Abstract Expressionists. One recalls Robert Motherwell's mordant, dismissive remark: "Little pictures are for midgets or for tourists—souvenirs."[3] Yet the twofold triumph of American painting and foreign policy that characterized the years immediately after the end of World War II no longer exists, and indeed has not for decades. By choice of scale Upton seeks to subvert the heroic view and replace it with one that is more intimate, human, and private. The public arena has not attracted him for many years; the small motif is his strategy for remaining private. Noting that many artists are "ashamed to do something beautiful, meditative or quiet," he believes that "one of the ways to be private is to be small. Look at my garden: I prefer it to my house because it's smaller and more intimate, but very complicated, a diagraming of edges, colors."

Upton's confrontation with the meaning of scale goes back to his student days in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Then, like most ambitious painters, he worked large. However, he was forced to confront the issue when his

3. Robert Motherwell, "A Letter from Robert Motherwell to Frank O'Hara Dated August 18, 1965," in *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965): 67.

father showed up at the end of the summer and, after a fruitless struggle to force the paintings into the family station wagon, demanded to know why his son painted such big paintings. Subsequently, during a painting sabbatical in the Delaware Water Gap, Upton again faced this question, but now did so within the parameters of the nascent ecology movement.

In the 1960s, largeness for its own sake became suspect as environmental values were juxtaposed to those of "greedy capitalism," to use a formulation from the period. What had been viewed as heroic, as representative of a certain manifest destiny, increasingly became seen as simply wasteful and exploitative. Co-existing and allied with the ecology movement was a certain widely shared interest in a "return to the land." A simpler lifestyle, with less emphasis on materialism, attracted large numbers of young people during these years. Richard Upton came of age as an artist in this era, and his work retains traces of the ethos we associate with the emergent counter-culture of the period.

One concept from that period that has remained an important benchmark is "question authority." A rallying cry in the 1960s, this phrase reflected an attitude toward religion, music, personal grooming, clothing, politics, gender, race, and the work ethic. One consequence of this widespread questioning of authority was that the critical hegemony of Clement Greenberg's formalist aesthetic came under attack. Pop artists like Andy Warhol employed irony and kitsch to dethrone the high seriousness of the Abstract Expressionists. Others, like Richard Upton, questioned the assumptions that seriousness required large scale and that quality was most likely to be found in abstraction. In this context many artists began to re-explore the expressive potentialities in figurative work generally and, specifically, in landscapes.

In addition to scale, Upton's brushwork and palette likewise subvert conventional notions of landscape. We have an oxymoron here: small, elbow-paintings. A virtual encyclopedia of painter's marks, Upton's paintings reflect his fascination with their variety, complexity, and expressive potential. He seems to sculpt his surfaces with an almost musical vocabulary of short straight strokes, curved quarter moons or commas, jarring angles, long defining dashes, brushy zig-zags, agitated squiggles, and incised lines. At times, as in 91-32 [No. 31], Upton smears his paint on with a palette knife, in homage to the skillful stucco work he's admired on the walls of Italian houses, but to me the technique is more evocative of the pastry chef's blade than the mason's trowel. Indeed, throughout 1991, Upton seemed preoccupied with experiments in contrasting thick and thin paint. Rising and falling, his surfaces become simulacra of the topography itself, and his compositions include the artistic management of the shadows cast by the raised edges of paint.

His love of surface, tactile values, and bright colors compels him to produce small, portable possessions with the flash and seductive qualities of antique gems. The fat, thickly applied, juicy paint appeals directly to our magpie eye; but the clash of saturated, complementary colors—especially red and green—adds a discordant note to our conception of what a classic landscape should be. The abundant use of red, after all, is not neutral since, again quoting Motherwell, "The 'pure' red of which certain abstractionists speak does not exist. . . . Any red is rooted in blood, glass, wine, hunters' caps, and a thousand other concrete phenomena. Otherwise we should have no feeling toward red or its relations, and it would be useless as an artistic element."[4] For this reason, the mood is unusually agitated, the hues obviously unnatural, although

4. Robert Motherwell, "Beyond the Aesthetic," *Design* 47, no. 8 (April 1946): 15.

Upton does maintain that his palette changes with each visit in response to seasonal and rainfall variations.

Upton's palette changes, however, do not merely reflect meteorological phenomena. Rather they reflect emotional tempests as well. The shift, in 1993, from a predominantly red/green palette to one characterized by an exuberant yellow represents a coming to terms with his loss over the death of his mother earlier in the year [Nos. 36 & 42]. As Brian H. Peterson, Curator of Exhibitions at the James A. Michener Art Museum, has written:

> One day he [Upton] ran into a nun (in the convent where he stays) who needed help digging a flower bed, so he grabbed a pick and shovel and set about the task. When he had finished, to his surprise the sister returned with a box full of marigolds, his mother's favorite flower. He remembered how each year his mother had carefully collected and saved marigold seeds for the next year's planting. This experience had the effect of freeing the creative energy that had been frozen by grief, and he produced a series of paintings dominated by the marigold colors: orange, yellow and green. Throughout the summer, while he made the paintings, he continued to tend the garden.[5]

Finally, Upton's pictorial space, with its use of multiple vanishing points, directly contradicts the model developed by Poussin and other masters of the classic landscape tradition. Instead of receding parallel planes linked by gentle diagonals within a linear perspective framework, Upton substitutes a Chinese-like, inverted perspective where forms appear stacked one on top of the other. Rather than being defined according to the laws of mathematical perspective where objects closer to the viewer appear larger than those more distant, the relative scale of the forms is modified for compositional imperatives. Not only does this way of organizing pictorial space undermine the rational, mathematical basis of recession, but it also serves to activate, while simultaneously flattening, the composition. This characteristic clearly differentiates the landscapes of late modernism from those of earlier eras.

Fundamentally, the rejection of traditional pictorial space, represents a way of thinking more than a way of drawing. (This is not to say that Upton rejects drawing. In fact, just the opposite is true: "drawing is fundamental for me not in a preparatory way or as a foundation for a painting, but rather because it's skeletal and revealing and offers truths about things.") Since perspective deals with how we see and how we organize information, his compositions reflect a subtle set of assumptions and not just a way of arranging forms on a page. Multiple vanishing points therefore express a view of simultaneity in contrast to the stasis characteristic of linear perspective. By eliminating converging orthogonals and a vanishing point in front of the artist, Upton brings an expanding, diverging and more emotive approach to his paintings. Even in the earlier, more representational paintings, such as 83-7 [No. 2], Upton incorporates this concept by transforming a single, floating cloud into a bar in order to track its progress across the sky. Like the cloud, the artist and the viewer are always moving and Upton expresses this state of perpetual flux by recording movement over time.

This dialectic between representation and conceptualization, between the ideal and the visible, is certainly longstanding: one recalls Plato's critique of painting as an imperfect approximation of an imperfect manifestation of an ideal form. Freed from the demands of mimesis, Upton thinks of the painting *sui generis*: "My feeling about these

5. In wall panels that accompanied *Richard Upton: Ten Years of Italian Landscapes*, which appeared at the James A. Michener Art Museum between December 20, 1993, and March 27, 1994.

paintings is that it's about the painting *Being*. It's not about the representation of something outside the painting since that would require that it look like the prototype which is presented again." Perhaps paradoxically, by concentrating on the painting's "Being" or, as Bill Berkson observed, on "the 'real' of the paint," Upton is able to capture "the look of the place [Cortona]—in [its] various aspects."[6]

How Upton looks or sees is an integral part of his working method. In conversation he has described how he waits for some aspect of the landscape to strike him, for example the curve of a hill, the play of shadows on a hillside, or the cleft of a ravine. Sitting in front of the landscape, he seeks to empty his mind of conscious thoughts and attain a state of receptiveness to the particularity of the subject. Almost ritualistically, he begins by laying down a number of strokes in a random manner, then responding to and building upon what he's set down. Like an actor and chorus, statement and response, each mark participates in an organically developing dialogue with every other mark. This surrealist, Jungian approach is Upton's pathway into his unconscious mind, and the resultant painting represents, on one level, his struggle to impose order on the accidental, the random, and the chaotic. At times, as in 91-3 [No. 26], a rational grid emerges and order is restored; other times, as in 93-10 [No. 38], Upton's surfaces seem closer to Aesculapian nests of frenzied snakes. Regardless of the final outcome, this approach to painting ensures that the surface never becomes a mere demonstration of virtuoso brushwork, of painterly facility, divorced from the underlying content.

6. Bill Berkson correspondence to Richard Upton dated 22 February 1994. Copy in possession of the author.

Upton's many rejections and manipulations of scale, brushwork, color, and pictorial space seem almost mannerist. Like the great *seicento* Italian Mannerists and their sophisticated patrons he knows the rules of the language of art. And he, like them, delights in playing with the rules. Yet his intent is anything but mannerist; rather he seeks to revitalize an art that had become a "closed system that perpetuated itself." By going from a closed to an open system, he seeks to emulate Pontormo, whose "drawings are so vital they contradict the idea of mannerism."

Ultimately Upton is concerned with a lesson learned long ago from Hans Hofmann, whose legacy he knew from Provincetown. For Upton, Hofmann's push-and-pull has more to do with understanding the relationship between the formal and the expressive rather than with the interaction of hues creating pictorial space. (Considering Upton's Anglo-Italian parentage, it is interesting that this opposition of the expressive and the formal is also the defining difference between the picturesque, irregular, colorful English and the logical, symmetrical, architectonic Italian gardens.) He believes in unchanging essences existing in the midst of constant change; this quest for essences, for the immutable, has led him to the conviction that the only truth is the inner truth. In his paintings the affirmative dialectic—between the rational/irrational, surface/subsurface, thick/thin, red/green, order/disorder, Northern/Southern, boundaries/freedom, revealed/concealed, perceptual/conceptual, sky/land, ancient/modern, pagan/Christian, and representation/abstraction—provides the framework for belief in the absence of ultimate proof. By means of abstraction, he transforms the seen, the visual or the physical into an inwardly experienced affirmation, a personal truth, a modern redemption.

RICHARD UPTON'S CORTONA LANDSCAPES

Fred Licht

Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, Venice

In the early 1430s, Fra Angelico moved from Florence to Cortona. Looking down toward Lake Trasimeno from the vantage point of his monastery he decided to capture the magnificent view in a painting. Thus the first topographically recognizable landscape was created and a new epoch, the epoch of landscape painting was born. The view captured by Fra Angelico served as background for a scene of the *Visitation*, a subject emblematic of man's ability to recognize and worship forces that are greater than he. In 1982, Richard Upton, having moved to Cortona under very different circumstances, became subject to a similar "Visitation." He too, expressed his discovery in terms of landscape.

It is easy enough to say "landscape." It is not quite so easy to define the premises, the opportunities, the difficulties and the satisfactions of this very peculiar subject matter that we today accept as a matter of course although it was actually one of the last conquests of western painting.

Figure and still-life paintings contain their own dimensional limitations. Figures and still-life elements such as apples or flowers have a clearly visible silhouette that defines their shape and character. By transferring that silhouette to paper or canvas, the artist automatically captures their appearance and a good part of their characteristic essence. The outline of a human figure or an apple also gives the artist another fundamental characteristic of all objects: its center. With periphery and center fully in evidence, the artist can continue his composition, inventing harmonious and expressive relationships between his figures or his apples, which he then adjusts to the format of the surface on which he has chosen to paint his picture. Landscape, on the other hand, is characterized by endless extent. It has no self-contained limits; it has no fixed center; consequently, it does not submit to a frame. Figure and still-life painting, by having external limitations, are akin to the page or canvas on which they are portrayed,

which also has clear-cut co-ordinates, a center, and a periphery. To reconcile limitless, centerless landscape to a limited canvas whose center is immediately perceived by the eye is one of the most complicated undertakings known to art.

Unlike Fra Angelico, his predecessor in Cortona, Upton had the advantage of having had a full experience of twentieth-century abstract painting. Abstraction is germane to landscape in that it, too, has no objectively perceivable dimensions or co-ordinates. The artist must furnish them in accordance to his intuition, and it is not just fortuitous happenstance that during the forties and fifties (when some resemblance between abstraction and the real world was still needed by the public and even by advanced critics) abstract painting was often discussed in terms of landscape.

Another peculiarity of landscape painting so obvious that it is usually forgotten is constituted by the need to reconcile the near and the far. For the true landscape painter, the soil underfoot and the distant horizon are of equal importance. Yet they belong to two completely different modes of perception. The earth on which one treads is palpably concrete. It can be assimilated through touch, smell, taste and—if only one has a sufficiently fine ear—hearing as well as sight. The horizon is pure illusion, evanescent and fugitive.

After Fra Angelico's epochal deed of describing and praising a highly particularized landscape vista, landscape gradually developed in two very divergent traditions. (Warning: like all simplifications, this division into two major lines of development must be taken with a great many grains of salt. In view of the present exhibition, it serves only as a sketchy background to the cultural sources on which Upton draws.) Both traditions go back to the fifteenth century. In Italy, Fra Angelico's conception of landscape as something that is comfortingly beautiful, sheltering, and essentially humane continues to predominate. Even after the Fall from Innocence, God maintains His promise to Adam that he and all his descendants will find bliss in their environment. Though no longer a Garden of Eden, the Earth still reverberates with the memory of Paradise. Even Baldovinetti, who endows his landscapes with a seemingly infinitely distant vanishing point, never allows one to feel lost or menaced by the immense and splendid vistas he sets before us. Human co-ordinates and human reactions dominate. From its beginnings, Italian landscape represents the world at large as man's oyster.

Later, with Bellini, Titian, Bassano in the sixteenth century, the lyrical, sheltering character of landscape is developed to its highest peak. In the seventeenth century, Annibale Carracci and Domenichino enlarge upon this principle in their highly structured, welcoming landscapes and go beyond the Venetians' emotionally lyric response to endow landscape with monumental grandeur. Landscape is seen as an analogue to the clearly understandable architectural structure of the universe. Poussin and Claude, basing themselves on their Italian predecessors, perfect this view and introduce it into the mainstream of European painting where it continues to develop in the most surprisingly fertile manner from Watteau to Delacroix, from Turner to Corot to Courbet and Cézanne.

In the Netherlands and in the German speaking territories, a very different response to nature begins to develop in the works of van Eyck and Patinir, coming to full expressive maturity in Rubens, Rembrandt, Ruisdael, Friedrich, Constable, and Nolde. This tradition is based on the perception of landscape as existentially alien to mankind. A tragic note prevails. Man is an intruder in the world, under constant threat of exile, forever threatened by the immensity of unbridled space. The restless mobility and the darker side of nature are stressed in contrast to the majestically stable, luminous views of the southern tradi-

tion. If one looks for artists who act as hyphens between these disparate traditions one can do no better than cite Antonello da Messina in Italy and Konrad Witz in Switzerland who start from opposite directions but are capable, each in his own highly idiosyncratic way, of reconciling cultural opposites.

American landscape painting of the nineteenth century grows to maturity in constant dialogue between the two major traditions even though at first the Classical vein (Cole, Bingham) tends to dominate. With Eakins, a more objective, independent view of landscape makes its entrance. Dispassionate distance from both earlier traditions makes itself felt. Neither northern pathos nor southern lyricism is tolerated by Eakins. The same can be said, though with totally different aesthetic results, of French Impressionism.

But American landscape painting does not tell the whole story of American attitudes and reactions towards landscape. For under Cole's classicizing tendencies, Fitz Hugh Lane's prettifying of landscape and Eakins's steely setting down of visible realities, there hovers a very different experience, unlike anything to be found in landscape description in any other national culture. Only one must look for it in American literature, in Hawthorne and Melville rather than in American painting of the same epoch.

This strange new note is unlike the southern tradition in that it does not admit of any logical structure that makes one feel protected. It is unlike the northern tradition in that it does not threaten to overwhelm and annihilate the human mind by the sheer vastness of its hostile space. Instead, the experience of the quintessential American landscape is one of an immense indifference that eludes all human faculties. It is landscape before the act of Creation. Willa Cather comes closest to it in the opening chapter of *My Ántonia* (the narrator traveling at night through the Nebraska plains speaks):

> There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.

Clearly, this is a landscape that can scarcely be translated into painting because it lies beyond human interpretation. It is no wonder, then, that the finest, the truest, and the most overwhelming descriptions of such an American experience of landscape were rendered not by brush on canvas but by the camera on film. The great photographers of the thirties who photographed views of the dustbowl or of other abandoned stretches of America are alone in having produced visual evidence of the majestically alien quality of American landscape. Only later abstraction of a tragic bent (Rothko's last paintings come to mind) could express a similar experience of "vastation."

How then does Upton's landscape painting relate to the landscape painting of the past and of the present? How does he conform to or rebel against its traditions? How does he expand its repertory and its possibilities?

Paul Tucker, in his magisterial analysis of Upton's paintings, has described with great skill the endless modulations of Upton's subtly concealed compositional motifs. Reading Tucker's text, it becomes self-evident that Upton's sensibility and his approach to expressing three-dimensional experience by two-dimensional means proves the artist's full commitment to the achievements of the modernist avant-garde from Cézanne to Abstract Expressionism. His loyalty to a highly disciplined and sober vision and his respect for the realities of the painter's means (i.e., a flat surface, pigments of a given viscosity, brushes of varying resilience) fulfill the most fundamental aesthetic exigencies of our time.

Some of our artists have put these means at the service of a frequently supercilious criticism of earlier forms of art (as happens in certain manifestations of Pop Art, Minimalism etc.). Others, and Upton is among them, have found ways of using their deep knowledge of and their respect for the past as an integral part of their creative methods. It is by this means, I believe, that Upton has managed to legitimize the practice of landscape painting in a new and thoroughly contemporary key. Not that he is alone in doing so. William Congdon, for instance, or Seymour Remenick has, each in a specifically individual manner, worked in the same direction. For Upton and for the other artists bent on using the fullness of their knowledge of the past to serve contemporary purposes, the revolution wrought by modern abstraction has been of infinite value. For their understanding of abstraction is a double one: it assures utmost liberty of invention and expression while it simultaneously imposes an extremely rigorous discipline bent on avoiding frivolous license. Take Upton's brushwork, for instance. If I may be permitted to use a term from music criticism then I would say that it has the *tessitura* that can also be found in Philip Guston's best work of the fifties: it has an independent, nondescriptive, calligraphic, and textural meaning without ever limiting itself to ornamental function. It also creates an organic continuity of surface that lends powerful unity to the finished work without sacrificing the expressive nature of each individual stroke. Both Upton and his great modernist predecessors are keenly aware of the whole range of expressive values inherent in brush work from Masaccio to Rembrandt, Rubens, Fragonard and all the way to Manet, Cézanne, and Picasso. At the same time they know how to use this awareness of a constantly growing tradition of brushwork to serve their own individual needs.

Upton's Cortona landscape can be thought of as a modern synthesis of the major western landscape traditions. Tucker's description of Upton's exquisitely hidden compositional devices clearly indicates the artist's allegiance to the Poussin–Cézanne tradition of classical landscape translated into post-Cubist, post-Abstraction logic. The compositional structure, however, is abetted by a more ambiguous handling of his brushwork. The willfully calligraphic, expressive nature of these pastose strokes carefully informs Upton's structural vision—each stroke is essential to the entire edifice. At the same time, the urgency with which he sets them down, has an emotional charge that moves in quite a different direction that catches the fermenting, ever-changing, elusive character of the landscape's soil and space.

Most astonishing of all is how Upton turns the—at first sight absurdly small—scale of his paintings to his purpose of bringing all past experience of landscape painting to bear on his reinterpretation of the craft. While the cannily structured composition suggests monumentality, the daringly small format signals "fragment." Ruisdael's and Friedrich's landscapes—with their tragic vision of a world so large that it eludes and dizzies the human faculties of comprehension—create an undertone that binds the Cortona landscapes together. By subtly compounding the enduring, logical structure of what he sees with the intuited vastness that lies beyond the confines of the painting's field, Upton manages to express the contradictory nature of landscape and its ability to console us at the same time that it overwhelms and engulfs us.

The small size has yet another mystifying effect: one cannot help wondering at the sight of these "variations on a theme" whether a secret common denominator connects all these individual views into one grand scheme which we are allowed to intuit without actually seeing it. Just as in real landscape, with its changing light, the restless nature of our sight allows us to observe only fragments which indicate something greater than the parts we are able to perceive.

In the end it is the mysteriously undefinable nature of a painting that determines the character and worth of an artist's work. The unanswerable questions raised by Upton's paintings are as important in this regard as anything that can be logically affirmed. Here are some of the enigmas that have delighted and vexed me. But each one of us is bound to draw up a very different list of his own:

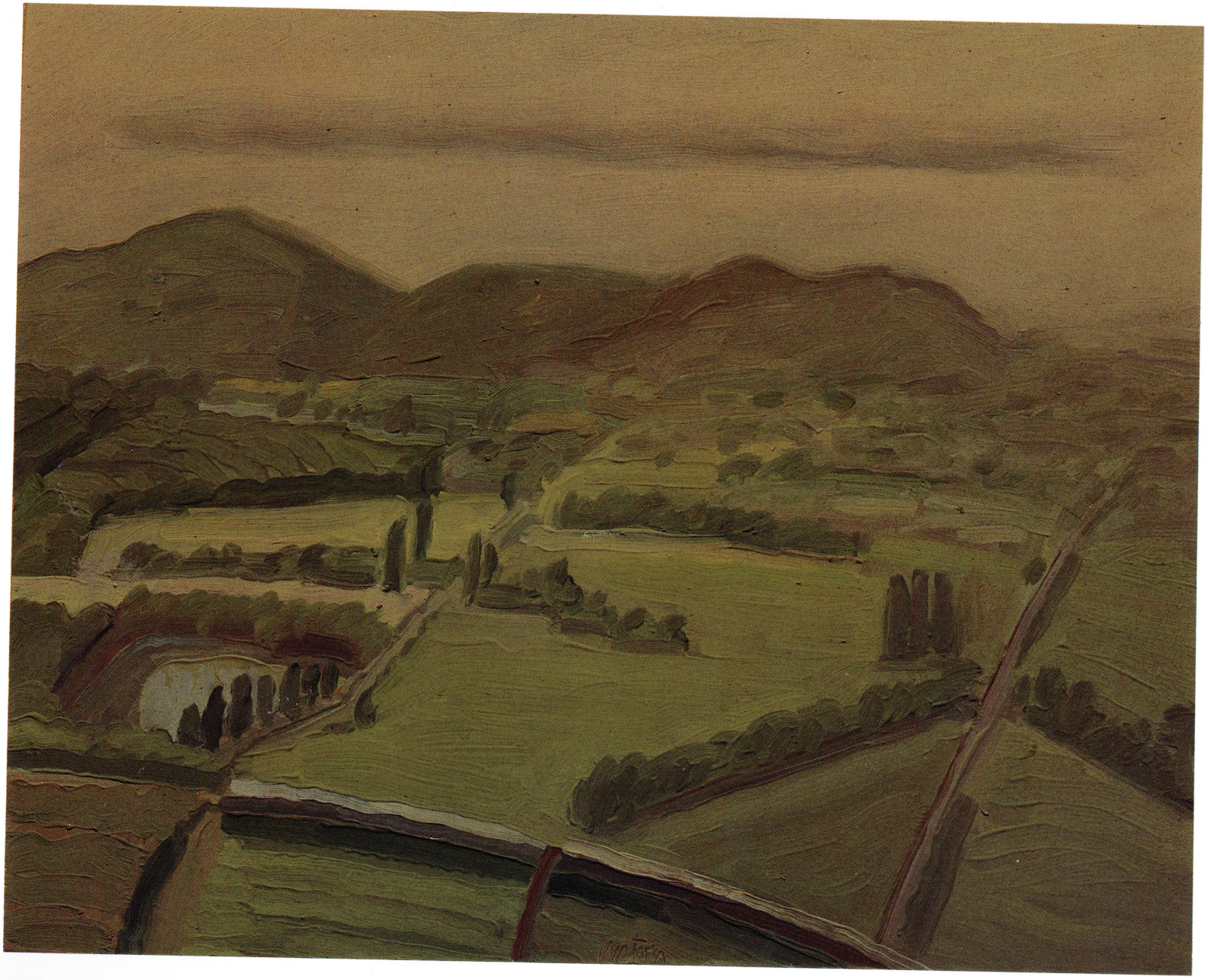
1. There is an immediate sensation of light in Upton's landscapes. Sometimes concentrated, sometimes diffuse, intense or muted. But there is never a hint of a light source, no legible shadows that indicate where the light is coming from. This gives his landscapes a breathtaking suspense. Light, the most fugitive element of a landscape, is here endowed with a timeless, immobile quality.

2. For all of Upton's love of Cortona, the city, though an integral part of the Tuscan landscape, never appears in his paintings and yet seems to exert a spell over the paintings.

3. In all "loaded brush" paintings, we are invited to enjoy the skill and the exuberance of the brush's adventures from close up. The painting as a whole falls into place only when we step back to a distance from the picture that is clearly indicated by the artist. In Upton's case, even when we stand at a distance the sensation is one of extreme proximity to his landscape, while at close range we retain a definite impression of the totality of his landscape space. The primitive and potent magic of "*pars pro toto*" reigns over these paintings. Fragment metamorphoses into totality. Dürer's *Räsenstuck* unleashes a similar sensation. In calling on Dürer, I do not imply any comparison whatever. I merely mean to illustrate the same phenomenon in the work of a totally different kind of artist.

4. Some paintings—and they are frequently the most serenely modest, deeply moving ones—summon up inner memories of music. For my own part, I cannot look at Upton's Cortona landscapes without hearing the last phrases of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*: "Ewig. Ewig."

1 Untitled/Cortona, 1982
(P82-9)



2 Untitled/Cortona, 1983
(P83-7)

3 Untitled/Cortona, 1983
(P83-13)

5 Untitled/Cortona, 1985
(P85-9)

8 Untitled/Cortona, 1985
(P85-18)

10 Untitled/Cortona, 1986
(P86-15)

12 Untitled/Cortona, 1987
(P87-8)

13 Untitled/Cortona, 1988
(P88-1)

14 Untitled/Cortona, 1988
(P88-19)

15 Untitled/Cortona, 1989
(P89-24)

16 Untitled/Cortona, 1990
(P90-4)

21 Untitled/Cortona, 1990
(P90-13)

23 Untitled/Cortona, 1990
(P90-25)

26 Untitled/Cortona, 1991
(P91-3)

31 Untitled/Cortona, 1991
(P91-32)

33 Untitled/Cortona, 1992
(P92-13)

34 Untitled/Cortona, 1992
(P92-15)

36 Untitled/Cortona, 1993
(P93-3)

38 Untitled/Cortona, 1993
(P93-10)

42 Untitled/Cortona, 1993
(P93-24)

45 Untitled/Cortona, 1995
(P95-6)

46 Untitled/Cortona, 1995
(P95-7)

47 Untitled/Cortona, 1995
(P95-8)

49 Untitled/Cortona, 1995
(P95-16)

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Note: All the paintings in the exhibition are oil on masonite, with the sole exception of Catalogue Number 24 [P90-30], which is on canvas. Each painting is 8 x 10 inches, height precedes width. Framed size of each is 16 x 18 inches. This symbol (<) marks paintings included in this catalogue.

1. Untitled/Cortona
   1982<
   [P82-9]

2. Untitled/Cortona
   1983<
   [P83-7]

3. Untitled/Cortona
   1983<
   [P83-13]

4. Untitled/Cortona
   1985
   [P85-7]

5. Untitled/Cortona
   1985<
   [P85-9]

6. Untitled/Cortona
   1985
   [P85-11]

7. Untitled/Cortona
   1985
   [P85-14]

8. Untitled/Cortona
   1985<
   [P85-18]

9. Untitled/Cortona
   1985
   [P85-19]

10. Untitled/Cortona
    1986<
    [P86-15]

11. Untitled/Cortona
    1987
    [P87-7]

12. Untitled/Cortona
    1987<
    [P87-8]

13. Untitled/Cortona
    1988<
    [P88-1]

14. Untitled/Cortona
    1988<
    [P88-19]

15. Untitled/Cortona
    1989<
    [P89-24]

16. Untitled/Cortona
    1990<
    [P90-4]

17. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-5]

18. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-6]

19. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-9]

20. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-11]

21. Untitled/Cortona
    1990<
    [P90-13]

22. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-17]

23. Untitled/Cortona
    1990<
    [P90-25]

24. Untitled/Cortona
    1990
    [P90-30]

25. Untitled/Cortona
    1991
    [P91-1]

26. Untitled/Cortona
    1991<
    [P91-3]

27. Untitled/Cortona
    1991
    [P91-5]

28. Untitled/Cortona
    1991
    [P91-14]

29. Untitled/Cortona
1991
[P91-15]

30. Untitled/Cortona
1991
[P91-31]

31. Untitled/Cortona
1991<
[P91-32]

32. Untitled/Cortona
1992
[P92-10]

33. Untitled/Cortona
1992<
[P92-13]

34. Untitled/Cortona
1992<
[P92-15]

35. Untitled/Cortona
1993
[P93-1]

36. Untitled/Cortona
1993<
[P93-3]

37. Untitled/Cortona
1993
[P93-5]

38. Untitled/Cortona
1993<
[P93-10]

39. Untitled/Cortona
1993
[P93-12]

40. Untitled/Cortona
1993
[P93-16]

41. Untitled/Cortona
1993
[P93-22]

42. Untitled/Cortona
1993<
[P93-24]

43. Untitled/Cortona
1995
[P95-2]

44. Untitled/Cortona
1995
[P95-3]

45. Untitled/Cortona
1995<
[P95-6]

46. Untitled/Cortona
1995<
[P95-7]

47. Untitled/Cortona
1995<
[P95-8]

48. Untitled/Cortona
1995
[P95-14]

49. Untitled/Cortona
1995<
[P95-16]

RICHARD UPTON

Born: Hartford, Connecticut, 1931
Resides: Saratoga Springs, New York

RECENT EXHIBITIONS

1997
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, "The Tuscan Landscapes of Richard Upton"

1996
National Academy of Design, New York City, "Collection Update: Recent Acquisitions"

1995
Condeso/Lawler Gallery, New York City, "Richard Upton: New Paintings"

1994
Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, "The Artist in Rural Ireland: Images of North Mayo"

1993
James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, "Richard Upton: Ten Years of Italian Landscapes"

1992
New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut, "The Italian Landscapes: Richard Upton at Cortona"

1991
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, "Tuscany Rediscovered: The Chronicles of Richard Upton"

Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois, "Richard Upton: Italian Landscapes"

1990
The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York City, "Paysage Démoralisé: Landscape at the End of the Century"

1989
Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, Georgia, "City on a Hill: Twenty Years of Artists at Cortona"

SELECTED LITERATURE

American Cultural Center. "Jeunes graveurs Américains." Exhibition brochure, Paris, 1971.

Boyers, Robert. "The Attack on Value in 20th Century Art." *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989).

Brenson, Michael. "Review/Art: Defining Nature by Its Battle Scars." *The New York Times* (June 1, 1990).

Candell, Victor. "Thoughts about Richard Upton." Exhibition brochure, Krannert Gallery, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, 1967.

Chayat, Sherry. "Art: Landscape Artist Avoids Cliché in His Tuscan Chronicles." *Syracuse Herald American* (June 2, 1991).

———. "Richard Upton/Museum of American Art." *Art News* (November 1992).

Corcoran Gallery of Art. "Delaware Water Gap." Exhibition checklist, 1975.

Donohoe, Victoria. "The Arts: Richard Upton's Italian Landscapes Displayed at Michener." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (January 9, 1994).

Galerie Mansart. "L'estampe contemporaine à la Bibliothèque Nationale." Exhibition checklist, Paris, 1975.

Gaugh, Harry F. "Richard Upton: New Work, New Prints." Exhibition brochure, Denison University, Granville, Ohio, 1971.

Georgia Museum of Art. *City on a Hill: Twenty Years of Artists at Cortona*. Exhibition catalogue, Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, 1989.

Harding, Ann. "Landscapes for our Time: Upton Revives an Ancient Art." *Saratogian* (August 1991).

Indiana Museum of Art. *'25' A Tribute to Henry Radford Hope*. Exhibition catalogue, Indiana Museum of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1966.

Kalamazoo Institute of Art. "Drawings by American Printmakers Invitational." Exhibition brochure, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1972.

Levy, Joel Corcos, and George F. Kuebler. "Richard Upton/The Salamovka Series." Exhibition catalogue, Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City, 1974.

Minnesota Museum of Arts. "American Drawings USA." Exhibition brochure, Minneapolis, 1969.

Moore College of Art. "American Drawings." Exhibition brochure, Philadelphia, 1968.

Moser, Joann. *Atelier 17: A 50th Anniversary Retrospective Exhibition*. Exhibition catalogue, Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1977.

Musée Denon, "Sept graveurs un sculpteur de médailles." Exhibition brochure, Chalon-sur-Saône, France, 1973.

Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museums. *Centennial Art Exhibition of Landgrant Colleges*. Exhibition catalogue, Kansas City, Missouri, 1961.

Schmeckebier, Laurence. "Portfolios by Richard Upton," Exhibition brochure, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 1969.

Shapiro, David. *Richard Upton: New Drawings, Ireland and Italy.* Exhibition catalogue, Forthcoming.

Silver, Kenneth E. "Richard Upton at the Michener Art Museum." *Art in America* (October 1994).

Sokolowski, Tom. "Paysage Démoralisé: Landscape at the End of the Century." Exhibition brochure, Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1990.

Sozanski, Edward J. "The Arts: Richard Upton: Ten Years of Italian Landscapes." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (March 11, 1994).

———. "Art: Portrait of the Artist after a Stay in Ireland." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (October 2, 1994).

Tucker, Paul H. *Richard Upton and the Rhetoric of Landscape.* New York, 1991.

Zimmer, William. "Art," *The New York Times* (May 17, 1992).

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris

Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

Library of Congress, The Pennell Fund, Washington

Montreal Museum of Fine Art, Montreal

Munson Williams Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York

Museum of American Art, The Richard Florsheim Art Fund, New Britain, Connecticut

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City

National Museum of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

HONORS AND AWARDS

Academician, National Academy of Design, 1995

Ballinglen Arts Foundation, 1995, 1994

Richard A. Florsheim Foundation, 1991

Artists for Environment Foundation/NEA, 1972–1973

Fulbright Grant, Paris, 1964–1965

UNDERWRITERS

Diversified Records Services, Inc.
Franklin First Savings Bank
Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery
Maslow Lumia Bartorillo Advertising
Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
John Sloan Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Andrew J. Sordoni, III
Wilkes University

SPONSORS

The Business Council
CBI-Creative Business Interiors
Eastern Insurance Group
Friedman Electric Supply Co., Inc.
Mr. and Mrs. David C. Hall
Marquis Art and Frame
Matheson Transfer Co.
Nabisco, Inc.
G. R. Noto Electrical Construction
Panzitta Enterprises, Inc.
Pennsylvania Millers Mutual Insurance Co.
Rosenn, Jenkins and Greenwald, L.L.P.
Trion Industries Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition has been made possible by the generous support of numerous individuals and organizations.

First and foremost, we are grateful to Richard Upton for his total commitment to this project. He has taken an active role in this exhibition and given unsparingly of his time. Not only has he met with Nancy Krueger and me on several occasions to show and discuss his work, but he has also assisted in financing the project by creating an original lithograph, which was printed by master printer Eileen Foti at the Rutgers University Center for Innovative Print and Paper under the direction of Judith K. Brodsky.

We thank Fred Licht, Curator at the Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, Venice, who managed to find time in his impossibly busy schedule to write an incisive essay for this catalogue.

Nancy Krueger handled many of the details involved with mounting the exhibition. She assisted in selecting the work and designing the installation.

My essay has benefited greatly from thoughtful, critical readings by Wilkes University Dean Robert J. Heaman and Robert Boyers, Editor of *Salmagundi*. Brian R. Sacolic, Reference and Database Librarian at Wilkes, helped by conducting bibliographic searches.

The artist wishes to thank Patti Pugh Henderer for her help in making this exhibition a reality.

Alvin Goodin, who has been a long-time supporter of the artist, has graciously made a matching grant to help underwrite the exhibition. The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts provided support for this and two other exhibitions. Additional support came from the members of The Business Council and the Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

Dean Phyllis Roth of Skidmore College has not only supported the work of Richard Upton through faculty research grants but also kindly provided me with lodging at The Surrey during my visits to Saratoga Springs.

Finally, I wish to thank Helen Farr Sloan, whose support of the Sordoni Art Gallery has been unstinting and constant. Her scholarship and love of art have set a standard against which I, and my predecessors at the Gallery, have measured our own efforts.

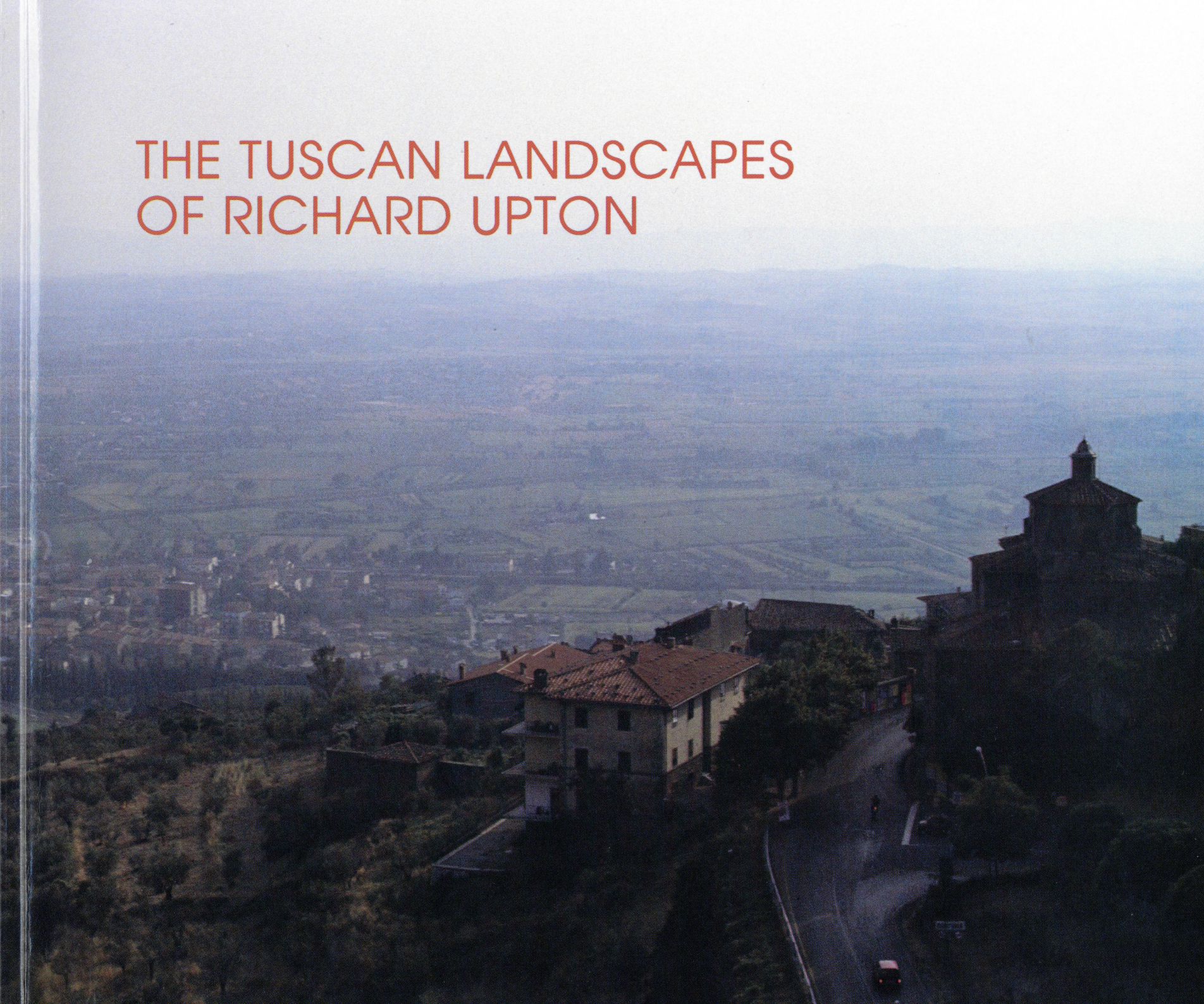
—SIG

ADVISORY COMMISSION

Freddie Bittenbender
Christopher N. Breiseth, Ph.D.
Marion M. Conyngham
Virginia C. Davis, Chair
Stanley I Grand, Ph.D.
Robert J. Heaman, Ph.D.
Mary Jane Henry
Keith A. Hunter, Esq.
J. Michael Lennon, Ph.D.
Melanie Maslow Lumia
Theo Lumia
Kenneth Marquis
Constance R. McCole
Hank O'Neal
Arnold Rifkin
Kim Ross
Charles A. Shaffer, Esq.
Susan Shoemaker, Esq.
William Shull
Helen Farr Sloan
Andrew J. Sordoni, III
Sally Sprankle
Sanford B. Sternlieb, M.D.
Mindi Thalenfeld
Thomas H. van Arsdale
Joel Zitofsky

STAFF

Stanley I Grand, Ph.D., Director
Nancy L. Krueger, Co-ordinator
Earl W. Lehman, Preparator

Gallery Attendants
Tom Harrington
Sarah Karlavage
Doreen Klimek
Amy Mazeitis
Lisa Tabbit

THE TUSCAN LANDSCAPES OF RICHARD UPTON