



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Rooms with a View: The Topographic Landscape in the American Home, 1780–1820

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This dissertation will examine the patronage and functions of overmantel and other landscape views in the American home during the early national period, 1780 to 1820. My research will focus on three important centers of economic and cultural exchange: the wealthy tobacco plantations of Virginia; the booming port city of Baltimore; and the rich farming and mercantile area of the Connecticut River Valley. By using a comparative approach to the study of landscape in this period, I will study how Americans in various regions of the country invested the landscape with competing meanings, and how they represented those landscapes within their homes.

Through a close examination of overmantel paintings in these three district regions, my project will explore what landscape representations signified in early American homes. How did the overmantels refer to the world outside the parlor—the local, the national, and the Atlantic world at large? Why were landscape scenes in particular the focal points of the parlor? How did these objects interact with the spaces and objects around them? Perhaps most importantly, how did overmantels represent and contribute to ideologies of imperialism? In addressing these questions, my dissertation explores a genre of landscape representation that has all too often been left out of the history of American art, thereby yielding new insights into late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century American conceptions and representations of nature, home, land, and empire.