

Transforming the Wilderness: Painting the Case of Hetch Hetchy

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American landscape painting developed in symbiotic tension with the early conservation and preservation movements, often functioning as a scrim that simultaneously sanctified wilderness while also commodifying it as a site for tourism and development. Well before environmental groups of the twentieth century, such as the Sierra Club, came to enlist commercial photography to serve purposes of agitprop, various forms of landscape painting—from the theatrical spectacle of Albert Bierstadt's singular *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863), to the proliferating "visual frenzy" of popular stereoscopic panoramas—inculcated American habits of viewing wilderness as a locus for spiritualized experience. Whereas photography's central role in shaping public perception of the environment and its subsequent transformation into national parks has been substantially acknowledged, the function of landscape paintings as "eco-images" in this capacity has been much less explored, and Gisela Parak's 2013 observation still stands largely true today: that though "there is considerable literature on the utilization of environmental images in contemporary media, the historical dimension of so-called eco-images... [is] often omitted in academic literature."

This study examines the particular ways that the landscape painter William Keith (1838–1911), in whose painting studio the Sierra Club informally began in 1893, participated in the 1908–1909 federal congressional hearings over the Hetch Hetchy Valley, and the site's ultimate transformation from protected wilderness to utilitarian water source for San Francisco. At the behest of John Muir, Keith created a series of specific landscapes that were meant to visually testify to Congress of Hetch Hetchy's exceptional and sublime beauty. As this environmentalist cause ultimately failed with the passage of the Raker Act of 1913, Keith's paintings offer a fascinating window onto the efficacy (or not) of "beauty" as a rhetorical and conceptual category within American legal frameworks of preservation and land usage. While the failure to protect and preserve Hetch Hetchy has been variously read as typifying "the trouble with wilderness" that is particularly acute in American environmentalism, I am more interested in the afterlife of the images associated in this transformation of valley into water source: the ways that Keith's eco-images directly anticipate later encounters between the law and environmental aesthetics. Part of the problem with the landscape tradition that Keith embodies, I argue, lies in its complex relation to time, and the genre's tendency to erase the presence of the humans in its representational frame.