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Title:

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Journal Issue:

[Streetnotes, 25](#)

Author:

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Publication Date:

2016

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/339598d3>

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Keywords:

Painted Panorama, Google Street View, John Vanderlyn, Cultural Heritage, Versailles

Local Identifier:

ucdavislibrary_streetnotes_29799

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Cultural Heritage and Spectacle: Painted and Digital Panoramic Re- Presentations of Versailles

Seth Thompson

Abstract

By comparing and contrasting two panoramic projects of Versailles, one being a painted panorama by John Vanderlyn (1775-1852) completed in 1819 and the other, part of Google's World Wonders Project launched in 2012, this paper will examine the notion of heritage as a tangible entity, experiential consumable, and identity maker, and show how heritage sites and the panorama (both painted and digital) act as a spectacle that seeks to fulfill the needs and desires of its visitors to consume past and present cultural landscapes.

Introduction

Since the advent of the painted panorama in the late 18th century, one of the goals for many panorama artists has been to faithfully depict the cultural landscape. The themes for the panorama have ranged from re-presenting locations such as Versailles, Salzburg, and The Hague to events such as the Battle of Gettysburg. With the advent of computer technology and comprehensive data capture such as VR panoramic photography, and video and scanning technologies, the notion of the panorama offers renewed opportunities in the re-presentation, preservation, and dissemination of cultural heritage. For example, Google's World Wonders Project, which was launched in 2012, showcases world heritage sites. Utilizing Google technologies such as Street View, which provides street-level panoramic views along various paths to simulate the notion of exploring a place, it offers an alternative experience of visiting world heritage sites, from the ancient temples of Kyoto to Pompeii.

One such site is, of course, Versailles. Located 20 kilometers outside of the city of Paris, the Palace of Versailles was considered the center of political power in France from 1682 until the French Revolution in 1789. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, the Palace and Park of Versailles are one of France's foremost tourist attractions. Putting John Vanderlyn's painted panorama of Versailles completed in 1819 next to the digital Versailles of the Google's World Wonders Project, allows us to see that heritage is not only a tangible entity, experiential consumable, and identity maker but also a spectacle of a new kind (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Detail of John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, 1819 (top) and Detail of Google World Wonders Project (*Palace and Park of Versailles*), 2012 (bottom). Image capture: Seth Thompson.

The Relationship Between Heritage and the Painted Panorama

Much like the definition of the panorama, heritage has become an all-embracing term to include many facets—both tangible and intangible—of our world's history and traditions such as buildings, monuments, and memorials as well as songs, festivals, and the natural environment. Heritage, in its broadest sense, encompasses artifacts or practices that are considered of historic or cultural value by a group of people, and thus, worthy of preservation.

The notion of heritage preservation is thought to have begun in France in the late 18th century. In 1837, France formally established the Commission des Monuments Historiques, which was charged with the task of cataloging and advising on the protection of the country's remarkable historic buildings. The notion of preservation would soon spread through Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States as well as the associated colonies in the 19th century (Harrison 44-45). These initiatives would culminate in the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which created a World Heritage Committee that would

manage the nominations to a World Heritage List, containing both natural and cultural heritage properties (Harrison 61-67). Today, the notion of cultural heritage has moved beyond “remarkable” buildings and places. The *ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter* defines cultural heritage as, “an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural heritage is often expressed as either *intangible* or *tangible cultural heritage*” (ICOMOS 21).

The painted panorama and its digital offspring can be used as a lens to understand the notion of cultural heritage. Richard Altick writes in *The Shows of London* that “The [painted] panorama’s claim to dignity as a quasi-cultural institution and to patronage as a respectable alternative to the theatre lay in its vaunted educational value. It was one of the several nineteenth-century commercial enterprises that were dedicated, on paper at least, to the dissemination of useful knowledge” (Altick 174). Conceived as a commercial endeavor to entertain the general public, the goal of the painted panorama was to create an immersive environment that reproduced the real world with such skill, that viewers would have difficulty distinguishing between “reality” and illusion (Oettermann 49). While some panoramas may have taken more artistic liberties than others, the painted panoramas attempted to be an accurate account of a place and/or event through rigorous research. This was not only a requirement of Robert Barker’s patent of the panorama; visitors would be quick to identify inaccuracies (Oettermann 52).

And yet, it can be argued that the painted panoramas of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries not only worked to accurately recount places and events, but also reflected the mores and interests of the times and places in which they were produced. The popularity of the “factual” content of the past depicted within the panorama can be seen as a blending of myths, memories, and values determined and defined by the needs of its target audience for which the panorama was created—becoming a spectacle—and which in-turn determined in part the panorama’s commercial success. In an effort to capitalize on the successes of past painted panorama endeavors, artist John Vanderlyn sought to use the panorama as a vehicle to entice the general public to visit his fine arts gallery (Gardner 3) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Contemporary view of John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, 1819 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Photo credit: Saikko, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_vanderlyn,_panoramic_view_of_the_palace_and_gardens_of_versailles,_1818-1819,_02.JPG.

John Vanderlyn, Cultural Heritage, and the Painted Panorama

John Vanderlyn appealed to community leaders, friends, and the local government to garner land and funds to build what is considered to be the first art museum in New York (Avery and Fodera 19; Robey 3). Vanderlyn's ambition was to have the fledgling gallery eventually become a national museum for the arts (Gardner 3). Loosely referencing the architecture of the Pantheon in Rome, the Rotunda, as it was known, consisted of two primary parts: the upper floor was dedicated exclusively to the presentation of panoramas while the lower level was to showcase more conventional fine art works. Visitors to the panorama would enter the lower level exhibition gallery and then go up a darkened spiral staircase onto a platform to view the panorama. The Rotunda, which opened to the public in 1818, strategically used panoramas to lure the public into the gallery, as it was considered a popular attraction of its day (Robey 4). Vanderlyn had hoped that the novelty of the panoramas would encourage the American public to visit the gallery and that he would be able to cultivate a greater appreciation of the fine arts through the other works exhibited there (Gardner 3). His commitment to this endeavor is reflected at the entrance of the Rotunda, which reads, "Dedicated to the Fine Arts" (Avery and Fodera 19).

Completed in 1819, John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, which measures 12 x 165 feet (circumference), was

created for the Rotunda. The finished panorama captures an imagined clear and crisp late afternoon day in early September on the French royal grounds of Versailles. Vanderlyn strategically chose the station point where viewers of the panorama stand at the head of the stairs near the Latona Fountain overlooking the regal three-hundred-and-sixty-degree vista of the Palace and Park of Versailles. Viewers may choose to take in a comprehensive view of the gardens and then turn around one hundred and eighty degrees to see the west façade of the palace. Speckled throughout the painting are prominent figures such as King Louis XVIII, Czar Alexander I, and King Frederick William III of Prussia, as well as stylishly dressed affluent tourists of all ages—strolling, reflecting, playing, and conversing throughout the remarkable Versailles landscape. Vanderlyn also included himself in the painting.

While the circular panorama painting is meticulous in its construction and detail, it should be noted that the grounds at the time that Vanderlyn sketched them were not as grand as presented in the finished painted panorama; they were almost deserted and unkempt, the fountains were not working, and sculptures and urns were gone from the park (Avery and Fodera 17). After the French Revolution, the Palace of Versailles underwent many transformations, from being in part a hospital and home for injured war veterans, to functioning as an art gallery and museum. It wasn't until 1892 that the curator of the museum at Versailles, Pierre de Nolhac, decided to restore Versailles back to its pre-revolution grandeur.

The fact that Vanderlyn sought to bring the Palace and Park of Versailles back to its heyday in his depiction and added people gazing and engaging with its history shows us that he was attempting to preserve Versailles' nostalgic past— separating the remarkable from the everyday. In *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Harrison argues that, "This [heritage] concept was underpinned by a series of modern ideals that saw the past as distant from the present...that established heritage as a 'class' of 'place' which should be set apart from the heart of the everyday" (Harrison 46). Vanderlyn's splitting the past from the quotidian is a quality of heritage.

Heritage as an Experiential Consumable

Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic growth in interest in heritage by the public, which is attributed to increased domestic and international travel as well as the marketability of heritage and the global commercialization of the past (Harrison 68-94). The cultural heritage industry has grown exponentially due to the new "experience" economy, where people travel locally and internationally to physically interact with the past. Harrison notes, "Heritage was no longer simply a symbol of civic society and part of the educative apparatus of the nation-state, but became an important 'industry' in its own right. In 2010, travel and tourism directly contributed \$759 billion to the U.S. economy, and it is estimated that over 78 percent of all travelers in that year participated in some form of cultural heritage activity or experience during their visit" (Harrison 87).

It should be noted that Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, which was completed in 1819, predates legislative acts to preserve heritage in France and elsewhere. As noted earlier, France formally established a Commission to catalog and advise on the protection of the country's remarkable historic buildings in 1837. It seems that Vanderlyn was not only forward-thinking in the value of heritage, and more specifically Versailles, but also understood how people might use it. In other words, through his painting, he may have predicted how people might experience the heritage of Versailles—conversing amongst the past, strolling, imagining, and playing as well as enjoying the scenes of what is considered the ideal royal residence by many for its opulent architecture, interiors, sculptures, and landscape design. Vanderlyn's depiction of people within the Palace and Park of Versailles is not too different from how Google's Street View of Versailles shows contemporary visitors using the site—although the former appears to be Vanderlyn's idealized version while the latter, Google's Street View, presents the actual. Nevertheless, the spectacle in both cases is inclusive of not only the physical heritage site being re-presented in painted and digital formats, but also the people depicted within these environments and how they are interacting with Versailles (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Detail of John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, 1819 (left) and Detail of Google World Wonders Project (Palace and Park of Versailles), 2012 (right). Image capture: Seth Thompson.

Heritage as an Identity Maker

State heritage preservation agendas in the 19th and 20th centuries were primarily interested in the notion of national identity and nation-building using cultural heritage. Heritage sites have acted as cultural tools for not only constructing and/or reconstructing history, but to preserve social and cultural meanings to create a sense of identity, self and belonging. In the book, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Harrison argues, "Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling

a series of objects, places, and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future” (Harrison 4).

The panorama, both painted and digital, can act as an interpretive lens into how a culture in a specific time and place views the notion of heritage, by not only analyzing what is chosen to be depicted on the screen or canvas, but how one interacts with it and uses it in discussion. Smith writes, “Identity is not simply something ‘produced’ or represented by heritage places or heritage moments, but is something actively and continually recreated and negotiated as people, communities, and institutions reinterpret, remember and reassess the meaning of the past in terms of the social, cultural and political needs of the present” (Smith 83).

The panoramas of Versailles provide a multi-layered look at the visitor’s gaze. As Smith argues, “Visiting a heritage site or museum is a performative state about identity in which the performer is also audience to the management and interpretive performances of the heritage site/museum management and interpretive staff... If meaning at heritage sites and museums is mediated through constructing and engaging with a plausible experience, rather than simply through presenting and reading the facts on interpretive panels, the heritage visitor becomes intimately concerned with decoding the meaning of those experiences” (Smith 70). And so, in both the imagined visitors by Vanderlyn and the un-choreographed recording of visitors by Google’s Street View, we see people responding to the site and creating memories: whether in a discussion or taking a photo or gazing at the physical site of Versailles, people are reacting to their surroundings—helping shape the identity of a place, a culture, and an individual (Fig. 5).

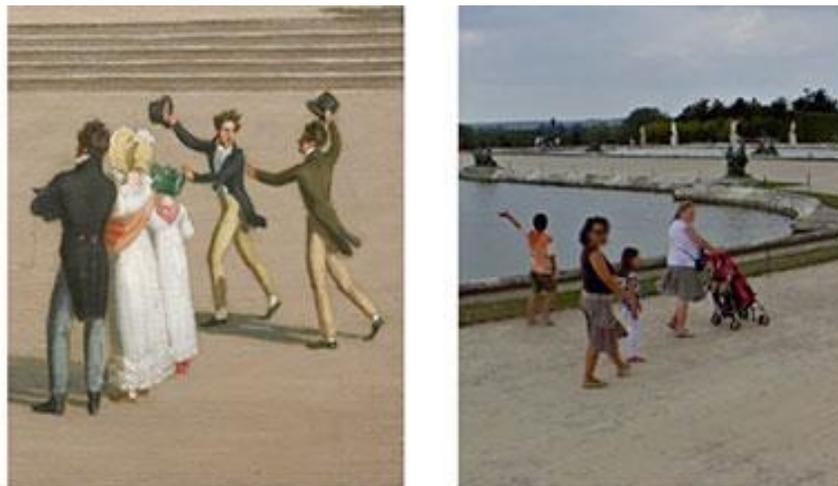


Fig. 5. Detail of John Vanderlyn’s *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, 1819 (left) and Detail of Google World Wonders Project (Palace and Park of Versailles), 2012 (right). Image capture: Seth Thompson.

Heritage as a Spectacle

Much like the panorama, the notion of cultural heritage is the constructed representation of language and objects resulting in the selective use of the past for contemporary purposes. The representation and dissemination of cultural heritage using such vehicles as heritage sites have become marketable attractions that have been repurposed as an experiential consumable and identity maker to facilitate cultural tourism. The result constitutes a spectacle, which may evoke images of curiosity, disapproval, wonder or admiration by its visitors or users depending on their predispositions.

Heritage tourism is in part representative of visitors' desire to directly experience and consume diverse and "authentic" past and present cultural landscapes and events (Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003, 703). In *The Heritage Industry*, Robert Hewison writes, "The impulse to preserve the past is in part of the impulse to preserve the self. Without knowing where we have been, it is difficult to know where we are going. The past is the foundation of individual and collective identity, objects from the past are the source of significance as cultural symbols. Continuity between past and present creates a sense of sequence...[I]t is a social emollient and reinforces national identity when confidence is weakened or threatened" (Hewison 1987, 47). The depiction of heritage found in many panoramas (both digital and painted) and heritage sites themselves seek to fulfill the similar needs and desires of its visitors (a.k.a. experience consumers) to compare and/or differentiate themselves and possibly their locale from the past and others.

Concluding Remarks

Vanderlyn's Rotunda and panorama did not achieve the financial success that he had hoped. In fact, it left him in debt. While visitors felt that the panorama was well painted, Versailles was not a popular subject matter of the time in which it was created, as many Americans felt that the palace and park were too ostentatious and opulent, and empathized with the revolution in France. At that time, it was believed that the American general public would be drawn to panoramas with local geographic connections or nationalistic tendencies such as battle scenes (Robey 8-9).

The painting also lacks a strong narrative that engages viewers in discussion. This is why it was so important to have the canvas populated with people interacting with the architecture and gardens of Versailles, as it risked strictly being a topographical survey of Versailles. Vanderlyn recognized this and continued to add figures into the panorama even after it debuted. He shares that: "My panorama painting of Versailles has... been exhibited in the afternoons to the public for these three weeks past. I reserved some of the mornings to retouch and introduce some figures and it still wants more" (Avery and Fodera 21).

In the case of Vanderlyn's panorama, the people within the circular painting not only humanize the setting, but in certain instances may act as role models to show the panorama visitors how to engage with the panorama, such as the astutely dressed man in the foreground, holding a monocle to his eye, as he examines a nearby sculpture (Robey 17). In Google's Street View of Versailles, the tourists show us how contemporary culture is consuming heritage (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Detail of Google World Wonders Project (Palace and Park of Versailles), 2012 (left) and Detail of John Vanderlyn's *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles*, 1819 (right). Image capture: Seth Thompson.

Heritage is more interesting when people are involved within the physical space, as it is sometimes more telling. How people interact with a heritage site or its re-presentation relays the type of emotive spectacle it presents to contemporary users such as appreciation, disdain, awe, or even apathy—revealing cultural, societal and/or an individual's values and mores. Heritage dissemination requires a humanistic component or it risks becoming sterile and irrelevant to people's lives. If Vanderlyn had not chosen to include people within his panorama of the Palace and Park of Versailles, it would have been just a carcass that required the visitors to be in awe of the grandness of the buildings. This is not sustainable for audience engagement. What makes heritage so compelling is when someone can engage with it—remembering, learning, and creating new memories. In *Uses of Heritage*, Laurajane Smith writes, "Heritage is about a sense of place. Not simply in constructing a sense of abstract identity, but also in helping us position ourselves as a nation, community or individual and our 'place' in our cultural, social and physical world" (Smith 75).

There are two primary layers then that help one engage with the past within the panorama: first, how people are depicted engaging within the panorama's pictorial space; and second, the act of remembering and imagining that helps bring the place that is depicted or recorded to life for the viewer. Cultural heritage has been called upon to authenticate, legitimize and unify as well as to challenge, negate, and undermine. In the case of the painted

panorama of Versailles, Vanderlyn offers an idealized version of people interacting with the past—creating a utopian-like depiction of what Vanderlyn may have hoped for the arts and culture in the United States. Whereas, the Google Streetview of Versailles offers a digital recording of not only a “contemporary” interpretation of “historical” Versailles but how visitors are interacting with the site, constructing identity through memory or imagined past using the impetus of nostalgia. This is what makes cultural heritage through the lens of the panorama so enticing—it creates a filter to aid in not only understanding the needs of a culture, society, and/or an individual in the time in which it was produced, but allows one to consider how our values and mores may have changed since.

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