
LANDSCAPE:

A WINDOW ON NATURE
29 MARCH – 24 JULY 2023

What is a landscape?

This is the question asked by this exhibition at the Louvre-Lens, approached from the perspective of art.

From the Renaissance to the present day, artists have been revisiting Creation myths in their own way through painting, by representing the sky, earth, sea, light and darkness. The shimmering moments captured by the Impressionists, the fleeting mist in Chinese paintings of mountains and water (*shanshui*), the thousand and one views of Japanese woodblock prints – all of these works whisper messages made up of light and shadow.



*Spring, Jean-François Millet, oil on canvas, 1868–1873, Musée d'Orsay – Paris
© Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt*

In the 17th century, this codified language found its register in what were known as ‘the ornaments of nature’: trees, plants, rocks and streams. In order to decipher it, this exhibition goes back to the sources of representations in art and follows artists through the various stages in their work, from the preparatory sketch to the finished work. In the process, it explores different types of landscape and views of nature, from the small drawing to the gigantic panorama, from the peaceful plain to menacing volcanoes, from the fleeting instant to the vision of eternity, from figuration to abstraction.

There are many mysteries: What places are these? What tools did artists use? What was their relationship to the science of their time? What did they feel in contact with natural sites?

Featuring 170 works, and two film theatres, the exhibition invites visitors behind the scenes in the creation of landscapes, from Nicolas Poussin to Canaletto, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Katsushika Hokusai, Utagawa Hiroshige, Camille Corot, John Martin, Catherine Empis, George Sand, Frederic Edwin Church, Jean-François Millet, Claude Monet, Wassily Kandinsky, Georgia O’Keeffe, Nicolas de Staël and Joan Mitchell.

In addition to the creations themselves – famous and more unexpected – the exhibition includes objects that make it possible to answer these questions, such as pedagogical manuals written by artists and tools used in the studio and outdoors. They make it possible to follow art lovers into their homes, where landscape depictions were a decorative feature, and artists during their expeditions, in their gardens and further afield.

The themes of the landscape and the still life remain very topical in today’s world, which has been totally transformed by human activity; works of art explore them and show to what extent art and landscape are interlinked.

The Louvre-Lens is a fitting location for this exhibition. It is set amid the mining landscape of the Pas-de-Calais, which was radically transformed in the 18th century and is now a UNESCO 'cultural, evolving and living landscape'. Designed by the Japanese architectural firm (Sanaa) and a French landscape designer (Catherine Mosbach), the Louvre-Lens and its park form a new component in this landscape. They create a dialogue with the forms of the nearby slag heaps and the volumes of the neighbouring miners' homes.

Exhibition design

A landscape to pass through by the artist Laurent Pernot

The sensorial and immersive exhibition design was entrusted to the artist Laurent Pernot and the architect and the Louvre-Lens' exhibition designer Mathis Boucher. Thanks to the interplay of different views and the use of sound and lighting, they provide visitors with a sensory experience of landscape.

Intention view (exhibition entrance)
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Les collines d'Inaba_ HIROSHI Utagawa_ Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet © RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris) Harry Bréjat

Exhibition organised with the support of the Mécénat des Mutuelles AXA

Exhibition Layout

Introduction

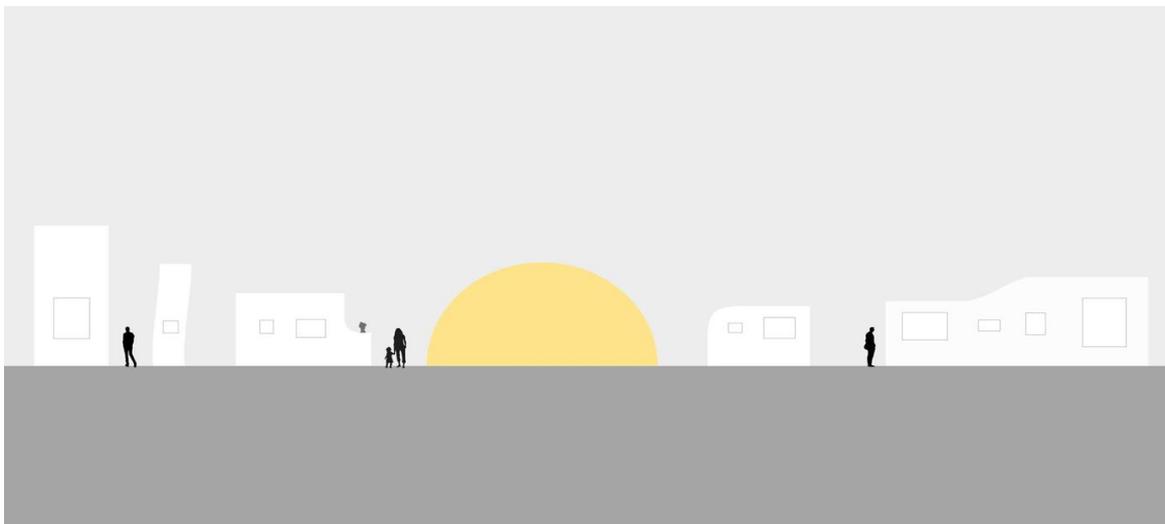
The depiction of the landscape was revolutionised during the Renaissance, in the 14th and 15th centuries, thanks to the important role played by perspective. **The painter's viewpoint**, from which it was constructed, now reigned supreme over landscape. During this period, Western artists identified with the Christian god, creator of the world. **They created works of art out of the chaos of their imaginations**, comparing them to the Creation recounted in the Bible.

Up until then, this Creation or cosmos was often seen as a living organism. In the 16th and 17th centuries, under the impetus of the scientific revolution, the cosmos began to be seen as a machine. Nature was regarded as a material that humans could mould as they saw fit. Piece by piece, step by step, **the landscape was assembled**, like a reduced version of the world.

Contemporary artist **Laurent Pernot's** exhibition design offers an immersion in this microcosm. Sensorial and open, it takes visitors **behind the scenes of landscape creation**, from the fragmentary sketch to the completed work, from the invention of perspective to that of abstraction in which all real objects were eliminated, from a distanced nature to an environment shared with the living and the non-living.

The exhibition gives visitors the opportunity to follow the various stages in the artist's work, up until the reinvention of the landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The exhibition opens with an immersive space, created by **Laurent Pernot**, made up of extracts from films. These immerse visitors in landscapes that seem to date from before the emergence of civilizations and before man had left his mark on nature. The selected sequences give rise to dreams, wonder and contemplation, through the combination of images and seminal films in a mixture of genres and geographical origins. The cartoon rubs shoulders with the *auteur* film and science fiction in an aural, spatial and visual ballet, which creates an initial sensory experience. Arousing the senses, this introduction invites visitors to continue their visit by drawing on not only their sight and hearing, but also by drawing their attention to the effects images have on their own perception.



The exhibition, a space envisaged as a landscape to pass through – view of the artist's design © Laurent Pernot – all rights reserved

The origin of worlds

The concepts of nature and landscape did not always exist; they are cultural constructs. To explain the Creation of the world, human beings invented founding stories: **origin myths**. Most of these myths were based on divinities in human or animal form. Thus, for the Egyptians, the goddess *Nut* was the Sky and the god *Geb*, the Earth. Even today, our languages, poetry and works of art are steeped in this anthropomorphic vision of nature, associating the elements with human-looking beings.

The idea of nature no doubt emerged gradually in the Neolithic period (between 8000 and 3000 BC), with the emergence of agriculture, animal breeding and cities. The term *natura* was derived from the Latin language, and evokes forces that regulate the world. For Christians, nature became the Creation of an omnipotent god; human beings were both creature and creator.

Landscape painting often appeared when the fusion between humans and their environment weakened.



The Creation of the World, Maison de la Bonne Presse, 1895–1896, magic lantern projection plate, glass © Église paroissiale Saint-Pierre et Sainte-Geneviève – Sommervieu (Normandie)

Nature's ornaments



Study of Tree Trunks, François Desportes, around 1692-1700, oil on paper, PBA de Lille, dépôt de la Manufacture et Musée nationaux – Sèvres © RMN-Grand Palais (PBA, Lille) / René-Gabriel Ojeda

How do you create a landscape? Position yourself too close to what you are depicting and the landscape turns into a portrait of a tree or a still life. Conversely, if you are too far away, the latter turns into a geographical map of an amorphous mixture of colours.

To leave the original chaos, you have to find the right distance. Get up close to study the elements one by one and then move away to assemble them. At least that is what various old pedagogical manuals teach, such as those of the artists **Nicolas Mandevare** (c. 1773/1793–1829) and **Katsushika Hokusai** (1760–1849). This method can be seen in artists' preparatory works.

Before creating his landscape, the artist studied in order to be able to reproduce **'the ornaments of nature'**: trees, rocks, skies and water. He could do this by copying the works of the masters who came before them, or 'in front of the motif', that is to say outdoors. The creative phase of the composition would take place later, often in the enclosed space of the studio.

The tree and the rock

Often studied together, **the tree and the rock** form a complementary couple. While the tree unfurls its branches towards the light, the rock is firmly anchored in the mass of the ground. A symbol of life since time immemorial, the tree played a crucial role in painting: it made it possible to organise the composition, to frame the view and to direct the viewer's gaze. As old as the world, the rock is the silent witness to the history of the earth. Some artists studied its forms to plumb the mysteries of the Creation of the world, while others used it as the prototype of a miniature mountain.

Sky and water

Unlike the tree and the rock, **skies and water** escape capture. Their depth is fascinating, inviting us to dream and contemplate, to forget ourselves and the world. Changing and shifting, they were a permanent challenge for artists: how can you fix the ephemeral and the intangible.

At the extreme point of the meeting of sky and sea, or between sky and earth, an unattainable line appears: the horizon. It unites and separates the top and bottom of the painting. In that respect, it plays the role of ornament, in the same way as the vertical thrust of the tree. Indirectly derived from the Latin *ordinare*, the ornament is indeed what organises the painting's composition and gives it harmony. Or that which brings chaos when the artist introduces some creative quirks by curving the line inward or breaking it.



The Rocks of Belle-Ile, the Côte Sauvage, Claude Monet, 1886, oil on canvas, Paris, musée d'Orsay © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) /Adrien Didierjean

The big confrontation

Sketched numerous times, the tree, the rock, the sky and water form an ABC. However, for a landscape to come into being, their combination must obey certain rules. In the opposite case, nature's ornaments float to the surface of the canvas, like decorative motifs that nothing can unite into a coherent whole.



Camera obscura, Jaan-Baptiste Porta, 1750 © Musée des arts et métiers - Paris

The grammar of landscape varied according to location and era. Artists learned it and adapted it by copying of the works of those who came before, and also by learning through contact with nature itself. In the West, **working outdoors** acquired a growing importance during the Renaissance, and continued unabated until the 19th century. Being on the spot made it possible to study not only the 'ornaments of nature', but also the latter's rhythm, its forces and its movements. It was thus imperative for an artist to confront nature directly.

The material aspect of tools had a decisive impact. **The invention of the paint tube in 1841 made possible the rapid development of outdoor painting.** Thanks to this revolution, it became easier for artists to work on the go. The real landscape became the painter's studio, since it was no longer necessary for him to prepare his colours.

Travelling the world

Topography, which had been developing since antiquity, is a science that seeks to understand how nature's natural and artificial forms are organised. It became established very early on, in a general way, as an essential discipline for understanding and mastering nature.

The 'topographical view' emerged in the 16th century, in the West. The aim was to represent landscapes as faithfully as possible. It reached its zenith in Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries, hence its second name, the **veduta**, the view. Its unity was based on the technical mastery of the rules of perspective.



View of the Santa Chiara Canal, in Venice, Giovanni Antonio Canal (Canaletto), c. 1730, oil on canvas, Paris, Musée Cognacq-Jay © RMN-Grand Palais / Agence Bulloz

In a search for absolute realism, artists used optical instruments as a 'camera lucida' and 'camera obscura'. Making an objective vision possible, they guided the artist's hand before nature



The Gorges d'Apremont, Théodore Rousseau, undated, oil on canvas © Limoges, Musée des Beaux-Arts - Palais de l'Evêché

Nearby worlds

In these technical and aesthetic approaches, the best way of enjoying nature and developing as an artist was to **travel**, going from one site to another, in lands with the most varied motifs possible. Landscape artists worked in the Île-de-France and in particular French regions known to be particularly picturesque.

One of the most famous texts on painting is *De pictura (On Painting)* by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), the 15th-century Italian art theoretician and architect. For him, the painting was an **'open window through which one can look at history'**.

However, Alberti pointed out that painting had to 'try to represent visible things'. To be as faithful as possible, European artists gradually abandoned the studio in order to create works in direct contact with real landscapes. During their trips, notably in France and Italy, they created repertoires of drawn and painted views which they drew on for the rest of their lives.

New worlds



Tropical landscape, Frederic Edwin Church, c. 1855 © Madrid, Musée national Thyssen-Bornemisza

Between the 15th and 20th centuries, Europe expanded beyond its own frontiers, gradually taking over nearly half of the inhabited world. Like the Dutch painter Frans Post (1612–1680), **Western artists followed in the tracks of colonialism, producing views of captured lands for the powerful.**

In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the transformation of the Western world pushed artists ever further in their quest for paradises that they imagined were intact. They thought they would find them in a fantasy Orient, stretching from North Africa to China and beyond.

Following nature's rhythm

Once nature's ornaments had been assembled into an overall composition, the fourth dimension, **time**, could be introduced.

In the Middle Ages, artists became fascinated by **nature's metamorphoses** in step with the rhythms of the days and seasons and of the convulsions in the earth's crust. These changes could enrich the forms and colours of artworks.

To evoke the constant changes of a more terrestrial world, artists worked in series, for example creating a painting featuring a sunrise together with its pendant representing a sunset, or a spring accompanied by a summer, an autumn and a winter. The techniques for making multiple reproductions were particularly well suited to working in series, exemplified by the brilliant woodblock prints of the Japanese artists **Katsushika Hokusai** and **Utagawa Hiroshige** (1797–1858).



Dawn at Isawa (Kai Province); series: Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, Katsushika Hokusai, 19th century, estampe, woodblock print, Paris, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet © RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris) / Richard Lambert

The pulse of time recalls **the days, the seasons and the years that measure out human life**. The contrast between the latter's brevity and the longer timespan of nature opened up a fifth dimension in landscape, that of **poetry and emotion**. Through this breach were introduced, depending on the era and culture, harmony and serenity or storms and passions.

Hours of the day and seasons



Dptych: Forum morning view (g.), Forum evening view (d.), Louise Joséphine Sarazin de Belmont, 1860, oil on canvas © Musée des Beaux-arts - Tours

In the Christian West, time belonged to God. In the late Middle Ages, the hours were marked by the prayers that the faithful could find in collections called ‘books of hours’. These richly decorated volumes became vehicles for **representing the hours and the seasons**. The latter also appeared in paintings, notably landscapes from the former Netherlands (present-day Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and present-day Nord-Pas-de-Calais), and later from the whole of Europe.

In China and later Japan, the spiritual concepts of Taoism and Buddhism also had an impact on the representation of the seasons. Indeed, they evoked a world in movement, one that was perpetually changing. Supple and concise, the artist’s line transcribes the perpetual changeability with which humans have to learn to live. Paintings and engravings of landscapes encourage contemplation and meditation.



Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion, John Martin, 1812, oil on canvas, Southampton City Art Gallery © Southampton City Art Gallery

Nature’s fury

As far back as antiquity, the arts have frequently demonstrated a predilection for **strong emotions**. Described as ‘**sublime**’, this aesthetic has been a feature of landscape painting from one era to the next. It can be found in the storms whipping up the seas in the pictures of 17th-century Flemish artists, and it re-emerged to powerful effect at the end of the 18th century under the pen of Edmund Burke (1729–1797), author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

Artists went off in search of the ‘**delightful terror**’ described by this Irish philosopher. They found it in the blue-tinged crevasses of glaciers and in the reddish lava of volcanoes. They enjoyed trembling and making others tremble by exposing nature’s infinite violence and human frailty. However, the industrial era, which began at the end of the 18th century, was marked by a new exploitation of natural resources. Frailty seemed to change sides.

A theatrical perspective

Early on, nature was used as the perfect support to accompany human ventures.

Be it a **simple setting**, in a theatrical spirit, an evocative or poetic environment, or an allegorical or dramatic counterpoint, it has been conceived, since antiquity, but above all during modern periods, as the backdrop to numerous illustrations of religious, historical, social or even ordinary narratives.

However, as well as being a setting, it often became a protagonist as well. From antiquity to the modern era, many subjects – mythological, religious, historical and literary – could not be created without its presence. For a long time, works were structured by the relationship between the story featured in a work and the representation of nature. In the 17th century, these uses of nature as a setting were the subject of precise, erudite theorising.

Setting the stage: theatre scenery

The tradition of the Western landscape is deeply rooted in the ancient theatre of the Greeks and Romans. It was no doubt linked to the scenery representing landscapes in front of which the actors performed.

In paintings, the landscape frequently serves as a setting to frame and enhance the scene taking place in the foreground. French painters such as the famous artist and theorist **Nicolas Poussin** (1594–1665) used the word ‘parergues’ (staffage) to describe elements of the painting that evoked the setting; these ‘hors-d’œuvre’, peripheral to the action of the main subject, made it possible to define the context, the country where the story was taking place, the era, time of day and ambiance



Meleager. Calydonian Boar Hunt, discovered in Vienna, c. 175–225, marble mosaic, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchal

History and fables should be treated

Gradually, a hierarchy was established in the world of painting: **the landscape, seen as a setting, was far from being the most important element.** In France, for example, it would be formalised during the period of King Louis XIV (1643–1715) by the art historian André Félibien (1619–1695). He drew on the order in which God created the elements of the world in the Bible.

In order to be closer to the erudite status of history painting, or the ‘Grand Genre’, **the landscape had to be composed.** Historical or mythological protagonists were set in a large landscape whose role was to reinforce the character of the story. The ‘historical landscape’, still known as the ‘**heroic landscape**’, developed.

The French art historian and painter Roger de Piles (1635–1709), an adversary of Félibien, felt that ‘Painting, which is a form of creation, is particularly so with regard to landscape.’ He highlighted the value of the **rural landscape**. Erudite history gave way to a more sensual approach.

Scenes with ruins, battle scenes

Ruins stimulated viewers' imaginations. They added colour and a picturesque quality to the landscape. In this collaborative interaction between artist and viewer, present, past and future intersect.

Although **paintings of battles** already existed, they became a separate genre in the late 16th-century Netherlands. Their growing importance was a reflection of historical developments. The birth of the modern state and advances in military technology redrew the map of Europe. The absolute monarchs who emerged shaped a world on a scale with their ambitions.



Les Charmes de la vie champêtre, François Boucher, vers 1735-1740, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Tony Querrec

Panoramas

A gigantic panoramic painting, lit by an opening above, installed in a made-to-measure building, the panorama was one of the biggest attractions in the 19th century, and was often presented as a show, with lighting effects, sounds and music. In a way, it was **the culmination of mimesis**: the imitation of the world through painting to the extent of substituting for it. This is reflected in a remark the painter Jacques-Louis David made to his students: 'Gentlemen, this is where you must study nature.' In this theatre with no actors, the viewer took the place of the *deus ex machina*. He was no longer in front of the painting, but dominated it, while being enclosed within it. The panorama reflected a desire to have access to an all-embracing 'whole', during a period when the city was rapidly changing and exploding in terms of scale.



Panorama of Constantinople, Pierre Prévost © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Mathieu Rabeau

Film theatre

The invention of cinema put an end to the popularity of panoramas. Yet the landscape remained a dominant element in films, in which it often played the same role as in painting and theatre. Light and movement, the illusion of which Impressionist painters had hitherto attempted to create, were projected onto the screen. Devised by **Laurent Perrot**, the selection of films follows on from the immersive space at the beginning of the exhibition, this time projecting us into a temporality in which the present and anticipation of the future are combined. The images proposed resonate with **contemporary preoccupations** like demographic growth, capitalism, war and the impact of industries and new technologies on nature. Abandoned places, prey to machines, ruins and climate turmoil raise questions about the future of landscapes reshaped by humans.

Reinventing nature

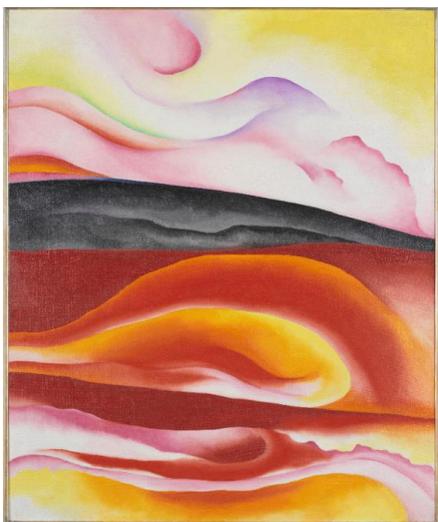
Going beyond realism

In the late 19th century, spurred by competition from photography and cinema, artists like **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866–1944) developed **new thinking about what painting should be**. In his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), Kandinsky described how the painter needed to free himself from the injunction to imitate nature. He had to seek what was true and, for that, trust in what he felt and thought. Gradually, highly personal visions and techniques emerged, in which colour, line, brushstroke and motif were freed from the rules of art. This marked the end of the single viewpoint introduced during the Renaissance.

Indeed, the landscape was no longer a fragment of reality cut out of the visible, nor a little theatre in which a story is told. Entirely interiorised, it was a **creation that grew out of the artist's sensibility and intellect**.



Kleine Welten I (Small Worlds I) ((series)), Wassily Kandinsky, 1922, Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne – Paris © Philippe Migeat - Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI /Dist. RMN-GP



Red, Yellow and Black Streak Georgia O'Keeffe, 1924, oil on canvas, Centre Pompidou, Paris © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Audrey Laurans © Georgia O'Keeffe, ADAGP 2022

Thus **abstract worlds** appeared, made up of forms and colours, memories, dreams and symbols, as in the dazzling landscapes of **Georgia O'Keeffe** (1887–1986). Bands of radiant colour unfurl, shimmering on a shifting shore, communicating the energies detected by the artist; the landscape acquired an individuality that was not based on *mimesis*. **Joan Mitchell** (1925–1992) developed a style of painting in which gesture and colour are paramount; the landscapes she created are memories of emotions she had felt.

Concerning the spiritual in nature: moods

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the landscape became a state of mind. The artist projected his emotions onto the canvas. Little by little, his mood became a landscape. Not only were elements like trees and light treated in such a way as to express his sadness and joy, his melancholy and serenity, but the painter started to choose places that resembled him. The increasing gravity of environmental problems pose a threat to this mirroring relationship. It leads us to ask the following question: what if landscapes had their own soul?

Environmental awareness emerged in the 19th century, for example in the forest of Fontainebleau, which was threatened by massive tree-felling. Artists like the painter **Théodore Rousseau** (1812–1867) and the writer **George Sand** (1804–1876) expressed their opposition and the forest became and remained an ‘artistic reserve’.

In an opinion piece, George Sand wrote: ‘When the earth will be vast and mutilated, our productions and our ideas will be in keeping with poor, ugly things that will strike our eyes at any time of the day. A narrowing of ideas has an effect on feelings, which become impoverished and twisted.’



Imaginary Landscape, George Sand, 1860-1876, watercolour on paper, Musée de la Vie romantique – Paris © Paris Musées / Musée de la Vie Romantique

These explorations were continued in the 20th century, **testing the limits of what a landscape could be**. Environmental preoccupations gradually brought new protagonists into this dance, under the aegis of a nature imperceptibly recovering the soul that it had been stripped of at the time of the mechanistic revolution. **This ‘crisis of sensibility’**, as described by the philosopher Baptiste Morizot and the art historian Estelle Zhong Mengual, is an invitation to reconnect with the living and the non-living, multiplying viewpoints.

This journey through the making of landscape ends with an open and dreamlike note with the artist and videographer Anne-Charlotte Finel; at the edge separating day and night, light and shadow, forest and city, defined and undefined, where all dreams and all ideas are possible. There is space for the imagination and sensibility, powerful forces thanks to which we are all landscape creators.

From park to museum: a cultural programme centred on the exhibition

A veritable cultural complex, the Louvre-Lens offers a programme of events that explores and deepens the exhibition’s theme: in the park and in the museum’s galleries, performances, talks, events, tours and unusual activities await visitors from March to July 2023. Details on

www.louvre-lens.fr

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

**Exhibition « Landscape: A window on nature »
from 29 March to 24 July 2023**

Open daily from 10am to 6pm, except Tuesday

Free for under 18 / 18-25 : 5€ / full price : 11€

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