

Archaeology, Landscape and Aesthetics

Abstract

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This presentation addresses the role of aesthetics in the discipline of landscape archaeology. This discipline is understood, following T.J. Wilkinson, as an examination of how landscapes are both shaped by and in turn shape human activities. The talk begins by rejecting the charge that aesthetic considerations are too ‘romantic’ and ‘impractical’ to play a serious role in the understanding of human practices. This charge confuses aesthetics with ‘aestheticism’, and it is a mistake to suppose that aesthetic interest in, say, artifacts or cultivated landscapes is disjoined from an interest in their practical roles.

Indeed, the talk argues that attention to aesthetic appreciation is necessary to the understanding sought by landscape archaeologists. Recent developments in aesthetics – notably an ‘engagement’ model of environmental appreciation and a focus on ‘everyday’ aesthetics – help to secure this argument, for these developments militate against the view of aesthetic appreciation as the preserve of detached connoisseurs.

In the central part of the talk, it is argued that aesthetic appreciation has an important place in the kinds of work or labour, such as farming, that human beings undertake in relation to landscapes. There is much evidence to show that how people practically engage with the land is significantly shaped by the aesthetic satisfactions they take in their work. These are not simply ‘collateral’ effects of practical efficiency, for they can come to override narrow considerations of efficiency. As Marx put it, people produce ‘according to the laws of beauty’, not simply to meet their ‘needs’.

The presentation concludes by arguing that attention to the aesthetic interests of peoples engaged with landscapes is of significant explanatory importance in landscape archaeology. It is sometimes necessary to recognize that contrasting aesthetic sensibilities are at work when trying to explain why peoples living in similar climates and environments shape their landscapes in strikingly different ways.