



Tony Foster and the Power of Place

The Foster Art & Wilderness Foundation was established with the belief that art can change lives. We might even go so far as to suggest (and hope!) that art can save the world. By introducing more people to the landscapes of Tony Foster, our goal is to inspire people to take action and to hold sacred the fragile wilderness areas that Foster paints.

How can the work of one artist change the world? The answer to this question lies in Tony Foster's process—a slow and deliberate examination of each wilderness site to record not a specific moment in time but a total experience of place. In today's fast-paced world, Foster remains a believer in age-old traditions and the importance of taking one's time.

As Jim Ballinger describes in his essay to follow, Foster's process is not new. He builds upon a long-established tradition of plein air painters of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. Renowned landscape artists such as Thomas Moran and Gunnar Widforss traveled to remote areas in the American West, recording what they saw in exacting detail. Like these artists, Foster also travels to each remote location and exposes himself to extreme climates and difficult conditions as he methodically does his work.

But Foster is not interested in mere replication of the landscape, often quipping, "If you want accuracy take a photograph." A photograph would depict the scene in a precise and very small moment of time—the millisecond it takes for the camera lens to open and shut. Instead, Foster aims to provide the viewer with a depiction of the place over the course of his often-lengthy stay. In this way, he is more akin to Claude Monet and the plein air artists who did not want to replicate the landscape but rather to depict an impression of it. While Foster's work is neither Impressionistic nor Realistic in the true artistic sense, it draws on both these traditions, lying somewhere between these worlds. His process, though seemingly old-fashioned, instead describes a very contemporary point of view.

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There has been much discussion recently on the Slow Movement that has (ironically) quickly become a global phenomenon. From Slow Food, to Slow Travel, and Slow Living, our fast-paced society suddenly sees the benefits of taking one's time.¹ While not inspired by the Slow Movement, Foster models its philosophy. The sites he paints often require arduous travel by foot or waterways. Every two hours, without fail, he stops to take a break—to sit, sip tea, and breathe in the wonders of the wilderness that surround him. Once finding a subject to paint, he sets up camp, unfolds his portable drawing board, and sits at times for days until the work is resolved enough to finish in his studio in Cornwall, England. He then takes meticulous notes on color and weather before packing up and starting the slow trek back home.

The focus and concentration Foster maintains as he paints in the open air no doubt produces the almost meditative state that psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihaly calls flow.² In the 1980s, Csikszentmihaly became interested in how artists such as Foster seem to lose themselves in their work, focusing hours at a time on a single task at hand. For art—both its creation and appreciation—flow happens when we slow down. That Foster spends so much time in one place is an integral part of his work. It grants him the opportunity to observe how the light hits a hillside at different times of the day. Or notice the native flora and fauna and the mark they leave on the landscape. The impressions of these observations are felt in artwork that manifest from this experience.

Foster's work reminds us of the power of place and the bonds we form with it. The belief that living in harmony with one's environment can improve one's life is the central tenet behind feng shui. For centuries, the Chinese have known what researchers are now proving—that our surroundings affect our lives. Sunlight, for instance, not only affects mood, but also increases our empathy towards strangers. Odors imperceptible to our conscious mind can affect our appetite, mood, and energy. Color has been shown to affect blood pressure and states of arousal.³

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Foster's paintings illustrate clearly the meaning each place holds over its local communities, as well as the artist himself. Unlike the tourist trinkets purchased at hotel gift shops, Foster's "souvenirs" relate the work back to the land from which it was born. Some of these objects are indeed the land itself—rock, dirt, and sand embedded within "talismans" of Foster's creation. These small, iconic objects, made precious by their inclusion within the frame, are symbolic expressions of time, memory, and place. Diary entries handwritten on the mat describe his time while on site, putting his thoughts, experiences, and emotions into the context of the environment.

Intertwined with all these elements is the fact that no one painting stands alone but is a part of a larger journey—Foster's concept that unites all individual pieces together. If each painting tells a story of Foster and place, then the journey is the book that binds these stories together. The journey is the complete work of art giving the viewer a full picture of the artist and his connection to the wilderness.

It is appropriate then that Foster titled this journey Sacred Places, and not Sacred Spaces. "Space," writes sociologist Thomas Gieryn, "is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out."⁴ Indeed, many sociologists and psychologists have researched and written about the phenomenon of place attachment, the emotional bond between person and place.⁵

Sacred Places is a journey about human spirituality and the places it creates. Throughout time, mankind has pursued a spiritual quest for meaning. Powerful bonds and spiritual associations between people and place have formed through this quest. These associations can be linked to a city (e.g. Jerusalem), a building (e.g. a church), or even a mountain.⁶ By painting some of these sacred, natural places, Foster pays homage to the land, the human spirit, and its need to sanctify.

Much can (and has) been written on the human need for spirituality. Karl Marx famously described religion as the opiate for the people, believing it was system used by the ruling class to oppress the masses. Emile Durkheim defined religion as the duality between the sacred and the profane. To him, religion is a social construct, created by societies as a way to organize and survive.⁷ Evolutionists also have theories on the development of religion and spirituality, some arguing that societies evolved to include religious practice, while others argue that it is religion itself that is the living organism that evolves.⁸ Perhaps the most compelling view is that of psychologist George Vaillant who sees the need for spirituality as an evolutionary development linked to the human brain and its capacity for emotions such as joy, love, and compassion.⁹

One does not need to be Navajo to feel a sense of awe when standing before Foster's Four Sacred Mountains. The power of the work comes directly from Foster's connection to the land, the time he spent there, and the bond that was created. Foster shares that bond through the souvenirs and diary entries he includes with each work. Stories about weather conditions, encounters with wildlife, or the enjoyment of company around the campfire resonate with viewers, allowing them to become part of the experience. Foster and the viewer become one—his bond with a place is now our own.

This is how one artist can save the world—by creating such a powerful sense of attachment to a place we've never been that we become willing to do anything to protect, conserve, and honor it.

Julie Muniz

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
- 2 See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).
- 3 Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 132. See also Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place: A Completely New Way of Looking at and Dealing with our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1990), 9–10.
- 4 Thomas F. Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 26 (2000): 465.
- 5 See Milligan, Melinda J. "Interactional Past And Potential: The Social Construction Of Place Attachment" *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1998): 1–33. Thomas F. Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 26 (2000): 463–496.
- 6 See Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Sacred Space and Place Attachment" *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (1993) 13: 231–242.
- 7 See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968). Originally published in 1915.
- 8 Jonathan Haidt, *Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 255. See also Nicholas Wade, *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why it Endures* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
- 9 See George E. Vaillant, *Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008).

“And I say the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.”

Black Elk
(Oglala Lakota (Sioux) medicine man and elder)

