

The 10 best... skies in art From sunrise to starry, starry nights, the most heavenly depictions of the sky

by Laura Cumming The Guardian and the Observer (Guardian News and Media) - Clipping Loc. 4026-78 | Sunday, March 11, 2012,

Christen Kobke's *Roof Ridge Of Frederiksborg Castle*. Photograph: Christian Kobke (1810-1848)/Det Danske Kunstindustrimuseum, Copenhagen Hiroshige Sudden Shower Over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake, No 58, from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (1857) Brooklyn Museum

We say we see the sky, but where is it exactly?

Hiroshige, Japanese master, had ways to make it appear all around us in his woodcuts, cross-fading land into sky, dark into light and air into moisture to radiant effect, partly by wiping ink from the block before printing. Here the black band at the top represents both the dark imperium of outer space and the raincloud shedding its needle-sharp striations upon the pedestrians surprised on the bridge.



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field* (1977) Dia Art Foundation, New York The American artist Walter De Maria is best known for 1977's *The Lightning Field*. A rectangular grid in New Mexico measuring one mile by one kilometre and formed of 400 stainless steel lightning rods, it creates an ultra-minimalist arena for witnessing meteorological activity. That is the formal description. But for the few who have actually seen it (entrance is highly restricted, and unofficial photography banned) the point, and power, of this work of land art is the way it connects the sky directly to the world, drawing down bolts of lightning - writing on the sky.



John Constable *Study of Clouds* (1822) Ashmolean Museum, Oxford It is never a sunny day in Constable country – there is always a cloud in the sky. But so accurate are these clouds that awed meteorologists can sometimes calculate the season and even the hour from his skies, which Constable famously called "the chief organ of sentiment" in any landscape. Here, the view is Hampstead Heath on a September morning. But what's remarkable is not so much the exactitude of observation as the way Constable's painted shapes materialise on the canvas without resolving into patterns or fixed forms: just like a sky full of clouds.



JMW Turner *Norham Castle Sunrise* (c1845) Dawn in Northumberland and the mist partly transmits and partly reflects the vivid yellow sunrise, forming a diffuse mirror image of the sky above. Turner shows the sun transforming matter into energy, turning the substantial world into an airy mirage in which cattle and castle almost disappear and the land is as vaporous as the sky. Practically any Turner sky could appear on this page but the late skyscapes, generally painted at sunrise, often on the spot, and very nearly abstract, are closer to the sublime than anything in English art. Caspar



David Friedrich *Easter Morning* (c1828-35) Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid This is the sky as a medium of revelation through which God shows himself, or in this case his only son. The painting has a mystical symmetry characteristic of this melancholy German Romantic. Three women – think of the three Marys at the foot of the cross - walk towards a misty golden vision, a body of light rising between the skeletal arms of the wintry trees. But green shoots are beginning to appear out of the dead land, spring is dawning and humankind is going forwards. The sky is a celestial sign: an evocation of the risen Christ.

Paul Nash *Battle of Britain* (1941) What happens when mankind eventually conquers the skies? Paul Nash's *Battle of Britain* shows the mounting cumulus above the Channel between England and France at the end of a summer's day. The Luftwaffe are approaching in tight formation, but the war in the air is producing great blossoms of smoke, whirling vapour trails and black plumes as the German planes are hit and spiral downwards. Nash always conceives of the world as a sphere in space. Here he shows the allies creating something perversely beautiful in the world's largest battleground: the sky.



Christian Kobke *Roof Ridge of Frederiksborg Castle* (1835) Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen Wish you were here? The marvellous Danish artist Christen Købke climbs the palace rooftops to give you the summer sky. Here is the dark roof ridge, the cool blue water beyond, the landscape repeating these horizontals in ever hazier stripes beneath a motionless sky that fills three-quarters of the painting. Everything contributes to this hymn to warm light and panoramic skies, the kind of praise no photograph can properly muster. And it's all witnessed on the spot by strange surrogates: a solid brick chimney and an elaborate spire both face the sky amazed, as if anticipating the art of Edward Hopper.

Titian *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520-23) National Gallery, London Eight glimmering stars, a silver lining and a faint glow from the east: it's a small corner of deep blue heaven. It is also momentous. Even if you didn't know that the scene below represented love at first sight, you would still sense some marvel dawning in the sky above – the exact transition between darkness and light. Titian is not known as a painter of skies; of all the great claims you could make for him, this would probably be the most bathetic. But the sky in *Bacchus and Ariadne* is as wondrous, and profound, as the whole painting itself.



Vincent van Gogh *The Starry Night* (1889) MoMa, New York Arguably the most famous sky in art, *The Starry Night* gives the view outside Van Gogh's sanatorium window at Saint- Rémy by dark, although it was painted the next day from memory. With its crackling cypresses and spiral constellations, its sun-like moon and its whirling clouds, this is an ecstatic expression of country skies as "purer than the suburbs or bars of Paris", in the artist's humble words. Swirls, dabs, hyphens and speeding vectors: the electrifying brushmarks seem to channel the flow of his sensations in a surging tide. The night sky, for Van Gogh, shines as bright as day.



Georgia O'Keeffe *Light Coming on the Plains III* (1917) Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas Skies have obvious affinities with pictures. They fill our field of vision like a painting - figurative when sun, moon and clouds are present, abstract when emptied of all but colour, light and air. Some artists simply want to paint those truths. Enthralled by the immense skies over Texas, Georgia O'Keeffe paints everything her eyes can take in at daybreak in this great arch of a watercolour, the last in a celebrated series from 1917 made near Amarillo. The sky hovers in her art between evocative naturalism and pure abstraction.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/mar/11/10-best-skies-art-in-pictures> accessed 14 March 2012