Topography

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Term for the description, mapping or other representation of the features of a given area. The term is associated with large-scale maps that show both the natural and artificial features of a terrain, although some geographers restrict its use to relief features only. In art-historical terms, it is also closely associated with certain descriptive genres of landscape and townscape views, as represented in paintings, drawings and prints.

1. Mapping.

Since the mid-1970s historians of cartography have become increasingly interested in the concepts involved in mapping; the relation of maps to certain genres of art; and the mapping activities of cultures outside the Western canon, which were previously unexplored or marginalized. Topographical maps form an important part of this research (others being celestial, cosmographical, political etc; see also Map), since they can be regarded as both reflecting and shaping the perception their makers have of the terrestrial space they inhabit and travel through. The study of Asian, Islamic and prehistoric European topographical maps is proving particularly fruitful in this respect, but there are also new angles on the well-studied Western canon of maps from Ptolemy onwards. Ptolemy himself made a fundamental distinction between ‘chorographic’ (topographical) maps and world maps, calling the latter ‘geographic’. His chorography was a representation of parts, a survey and delineation of features over an area of terrain, which did not need to show a relationship to the country or world, whereas his geography was a representation of the whole—the shape of the known world and everything in it, as it were. While Ptolemy’s definition of geography could conceivably include topography, the distinction between the two concepts is echoed in the Western development of topographical maps as a more or less separate genre from world maps. This did not necessarily stem from mapmakers consciously following Ptolemy’s distinction; rather, the mapmakers built on existing traditions. For example medieval world maps (mappae mundi) were stylistically related to Classical world maps, while medieval topographical maps bear more resemblance to medieval building plans. A modern distinction would be between
maps with physical (geographic) features and those with political boundaries of countries, but there is no longer as marked a difference in concept or style.

A historical survey of topographical representation reveals remarkably similar, sweeping changes at various points in the history of major mapmaking cultures—from China to Mexico—although not necessarily changes that became the continuous tradition in that culture. Some scholars have identified these changes in the broadest of terms as from the symbolic to the pictorial and then back to the symbolic. In some Palaeolithic rock-carvings, such as those at Mt Bego in the Italian Alps, lines and dots have been identified as paths, huts and enclosures as seen from above. It is not clear whether these were maps; the answer depends mainly on assumptions about what the function of a map is. The main function of the carvings may well have been symbolic, perhaps mystical, whereas maps are usually regarded primarily as navigational, administrative, military or generally educational aids. It is easier to regard the Palaeolithic carvings simply as topographical and, since they are views from above not from the side, as schematic and symbolic. Another example is the Tepe Gawra ‘Landscape’ jar (Baghdad, Iraq Mus.) dating from the 5th or 4th millennium BC, on which landscape features are rendered into linear and geometric patterns. Similarly schematic-looking ‘maps’, both sculptural and graphic, are still found in cultures from the southwest Pacific, notably the Marshall Islands, and in Native American and Inuit cultures.

More literal figures appeared in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt and, before the 2nd century BC, in China, and these constitute early ‘picture-maps’. Features such as buildings and trees were commonly rendered as uniform figures seen in elevation, although orientation is not at all uniform. Easily identifiable features often appear right next to more symbolic figures. The earliest known of these picture-maps is a Mesopotamian clay tablet c. 2500-2300 BC (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U., Semit. Mus.). Two ranges of hills are rendered on this as rows of semicircles orientated in opposition to each other; between them is a river marked as four lines running across the tablet, while towns are named and shown as circles. One Chinese military map of the 2nd century BC (Changsha, Hunan Prov. Mus.), found in Tomb 3 of the Mawangdui site, depicts an area in the Nanling Mountains (see fig.). In this remarkable rendition of topography, a small image of a military headquarters is easily spotted, while the host of fine lines curling in various directions are, less obviously, the mountains and rivers.
Topographical map of an area in the Nanling Mountains, southern China; simplified reconstruction drawing of a damaged silk map, from Tomb 3, Mawangdui site, near Changsha, 2nd century BC (Changsha, Hunan Provincial Museum)

Oblique and Bird’s-eye views for maps, in which topographical features are depicted as if being viewed from a point in space above the terrain, are linked, particularly in European history, with artistic conventions in townscape (see §2 below), which themselves can be regarded as a form of mapping or, in another light, evidence of a human compulsion to map or record one’s surroundings. Quite how the bird’s-eye perspective was achieved before the advent of flight is a matter for debate; there may have been surveying techniques now unknown. The fictional viewpoint in Jacopo de’ Barbari’s aerial View of Venice of 1500 is an outstanding example, in which buildings are convincingly detailed. The function of such images is, again, sometimes unclear. Jacopo’s woodcut is identified more with maps than with descriptive art simply because its decorative features and text are in the mapmaking tradition; however, the print was probably made more to glorify Venice than for any conventional topographical function. In many cases, however, topographical works were made for military purposes. Detailed Islamic maps of cities, such as the beautiful Siege Plan of Belgrade (early 16th century; Istanbul, Topkapı Pal. Lib., MS. E. 9440), were probably influenced by the prevalent use of the bird’s-eye view in Italian maps.

When strictly from one perspective, the bird’s-eye view is not a consistent representation of topography, since to be optically correct the features would have to tail off to the edges of the map, or
suggest that they do just beyond. Another common mapmaking device in quite separate cultures was to show importance by size, so certain areas of the map, or single features, were disproportionate to the rest. The development of topographical maps, in which scale as well as orientation were consistent, was necessary for military manoeuvres and important generally as a tool of power and control. The sea-change from picture-maps to scale-maps and surveys, in fact, occurred in various cultures, even in Mesopotamia, and most certainly ancient Rome and China after the 3rd century AD, without continuing as a tradition (Harvey). The tendency towards abstraction and symbolism, rather than literal representation, thus reappears with the scale-map. The scale-map and bird’s-eye map were both made in Europe during the 16th century; however, it was the scale-map that prevailed in mapping from the early 17th century, while the bird’s-eye view became more associated with descriptive art. The scale-map is a scheme of topography; individual features are shown, often in great detail, but perspective is absent, and any one point on the map is plotted as if from a point directly above it. The first and foremost sense for the viewer is of perceiving the spatial relationship of topographical features to each other, while the features themselves are rendered mainly symbolically, but with literal elements. In the Western world the trend towards uniform orientation—both in north being the top of the map (even more so in world maps) and topographical features all being in one plane—shaped the prevailing modern visualization of a given part of the world as being above, below, to the left or the right of other places. Outside the Western world, topographical features were likely to be orientated more in relation to each other than to the viewer—mountain ranges in opposition to each other, trees following the curve of a river etc—until the homogenizing Western methods were adopted. An Indian map, attributed to Abdur Rahim and no later than 1836, of the Vale of Kashmir (London, BL) differs stylistically from the colonial British survey-maps of India, and topographical features, particularly the stylized trees, lie at different angles to the text on the map. Later refinements to topographical maps included the invention of hachuring and contour lines to denote the shape of the ground.

Itineraries of routes are a further type of topographical mapping, although images are rare. In civilizations as diverse as ancient Rome and China (from at least the 3rd century AD), texts were written to guide travellers; they would describe topographical features along the route and their distance from one another (see also Travel manuscripts). The few surviving examples of these as visual maps often do not resemble the shape of the countries they describe. Rather, the simple concept of the journey being a line through a terrain is rendered pictorially. Thus changes of direction are more likely to be written or marked by the presence of a compass rose than plotted spatially. The Tabula Peutingeriana (13th century; Vienna, Österreich. Nbib., Cod. 324) is a copy of an itinerary map from around the 3rd century AD (untraced) of principal routes through the Roman Empire, and it shows Europe in a strip 6.75 m
long but only 340 mm wide. Later examples include the mid-13th century AD maps by Matthew Paris of routes through Britain, or in India the Chahar Gulshan ('Four gardens'; 1789; New Delhi, N. Mus.), describing routes through northern India, and a scroll map with the features on the road from Kandahar to Delhi (c. 1770; London, BL, Orient. & India Office Lib.). The ‘rutters’ of the 16th–19th centuries were for maritime navigation, showing the itinerary of a coastline. Some, particularly a few by the Netherlandish maritime mapmaker Lucas Jansz. Waghenaer (1533/4–1606), are a poignant blend of closely observed topographical features as seen in elevation from the sea, but with the shape of the coastline as seen from above to signal the presence and extent of bays, which cannot be seen from the sea. The 20th-century equivalent of the rutters are the striplike diagrams or photographs on pilotage charts, but the development of more technological methods of maritime navigation marked the decline in sophistication of the genre. During the 1980s there was a burgeoning interest in topographical Papunya paintings (see Aboriginal Australia, §IV, 1), in which the significant features on journeys are rendered through colour and symbolic shapes, lines and dots; these are imaginative responses to itineraries rather than navigational aids.

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2. Descriptive art.

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Descriptive topographical art depicts faithfully and exactly in paintings, prints or drawings an identifiable locality and its ambience, most often a building or a cluster of buildings within an urban or rural setting, or a panorama of a town or city. While this definition includes particular landscapes or isolated buildings, such as country houses as well as certain relatively unstudied works that fall outside Western art history, this section focuses on European topographical art, particularly townscape painting, which flourished between the mid-17th century and the end of the 19th. With the latter, the town or city itself—whether viewed from within, with the accent on its rivers, canals, streets or squares, or from without, with the emphasis on the panorama, the profile or the bird’s-eye view—became worthy of contemplation and the subject for a work of art. The finest topographical views are, of course, appreciated and collected as works of art, but they are also documents that chronicle the growth and changing appearance of landscapes and townscapes since the Middle Ages, and they reveal contemporary values invested in the places and features depicted. Many townscape artists, moreover, sought to depict the urban experience: the relationship between the physical fabric of the city and Nature brought under control; the creation of a political, social, economic and moral order; and the interaction between transitory human activity and the relatively permanent cityscape (see also Urban life).

(i) Before c. 1650.

The development of descriptive topographical art before the mid-17th century can be studied from a Europe-wide perspective, although details varied in specific countries or regions. Townscapes were not uncommon in painting by the 14th and 15th centuries, but until the early 17th century they most often served as backdrops or were imaginary. In the Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duc de Berry (c. 1413–16; completed c. 1486; Chantilly, Mus. Condé, MS 65; see fig.), and in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s three frescoes on the theme of the effects of good and bad government in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (1338–9) there are recognizable buildings in characteristic settings, as well as the busy life of town and countryside. Similarly, accurate Venetian townscapes function as stage sets in the series of paintings illustrating the Miracles of the True Cross (1500; all Venice, Accad.) by Gentile Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio and others (e.g. Bellini’s Procession of the True Cross in the Piazza S Marco). Realistic-looking but imaginary cityscapes appear in the background of such Flemish paintings as the Mérode Altarpiece (1425; New York, Cloisters) by the Master of Flémalle and in Jan van Eyck’s Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin (Paris, Louvre). In works such as the
Pieter Bruegel the elder and his many imitators painted fictional but representative Flemish towns. El Greco’s View and Plan of Toledo (c. 1610; Toledo, Casa & Mus. El Greco) and View of Toledo (c. 1610; New York, Met.; see Toledo, §II, 2) stand almost alone as independent cityscapes.

Actual townscapes, by contrast, became popular subjects in illustrated books, maps and prints, as well as in drawings, shortly after the invention of the printing press. Venice was portrayed with reasonable accuracy by Erhard Reuwich in Peregrinatio in terram sanctum (1486) for Bernhard von Breydenbach (1450–97). Other volumes with panoramas or profiles of cities followed, from the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493) and the six-volume atlas by G. Braun and F. Hogenberg, the Civitates orbis terrarum (1572–1618), to the 17th-century townscapes by Matthäus Merian the elder (see Merian family, §1) and others. Contemporary maps, such as Jacopo de’ Barbari’s woodcut View of Venice (1500), were closely related to townscape traditions (see §1 above). Topographical prints of Roman antiquities and ruins were published by Hieronymus Cock (see Cock family, §3), while other merchants marketed architectural views and representations of celebrated festivals or recent events. Meanwhile, Anthonis van den Wyngaerde drew panoramas of London and Spanish cities. Other early townscapes include drawings of Nuremberg and Innsbruck by Albrecht Dürer. Such proliferation of townscapes (imaginary as well as real), reflects not only contemporary awareness of the growing number and importance of cities in Europe but also interest in the city itself and the nature of urban life.

(ii) After c. 1650.

The topographical townscape thrived in the Netherlands and Italy as an independent motif during the 17th and 18th centuries (see also Townscape). Later developments in topographical art took place mainly in Britain and France up to the end of the 19th century, when, following the proliferation of photographic images, the making of such images virtually ceased.

(a) The Netherlands and Italy.

Dutch townscapes and architectural painting flourished between the 1650s and c. 1700 within a specific historical and cultural context. Emblematic of Dutch prosperity after independence from Spain in 1609 was the tidy appearance of the Republic’s expanding towns and cities, with their paved streets, canals and substantial but not ostentatious public and private buildings. Taste for views of such towns as Haarlem, Amsterdam and Delft expressed not just national or civic pride but also quiet satisfaction with the creation of an
orderly and aesthetically pleasing built environment and the common political, economic and religious values it represented. As with Dutch traditions in painting church interiors, the topographical townscape, with its confident, serene and detailed description of a harmonious world planned and constructed by man, accordingly mirrored Dutch perceptions of their urban environment (see also Architectural pictures, §2). Gerrit Berckheyde, for example, devoted himself almost exclusively to topographical views of cities. His Grote Markt and the Grote Kerk at Haarlem (1674; London, N.G.; for illustration see Berckheyde family, §2) shows not only elegant buildings harmoniously arranged around an open square but also characteristic human activity integrated with the built environment. The view and the buildings chosen suggest intersecting political, commercial and religious themes, while the painting itself embodies the values of order and decorum. Jan van der Heyden was more influential than Berckheyde but less topographically accurate.


The Italian Veduta, associated primarily with Canaletto (see fig.) and his nephew Bernardo Bellotto, as well as with Luca Carlevaris, Michele Giovanni Marieschi and Francesco Guardi, dominated topographical art during much of the 18th century. Indeed, so enduring is the achievement of Canaletto, the finest of the veduta painters, that he preserved not only the physical appearance but also the urban ambience of Venice to such a degree and with such
captivating light that Arthur Young, an English traveller, measured the city he observed in 1788 against the painted image and found the former wanting. Guardi, on the other hand, often discarded exact topographical descriptions for subjective cityscapes filled with a nervous, almost threatening atmosphere. Unlike the Dutch townscape painters, who celebrated for their compatriots the achievements and values of Dutch urban life, the Italian *veduta* painters worked at a time of political and economic decline, often representing the splendour of a Venice past its prime for those taking Grand Tours, frequently British aristocrats. Examples of Capriccio by Canaletto, Guardi, Giovanni Paolo Panini and others provide a variant of topography, for they create a fanciful and fictitious urban environment composed of arbitrarily juxtaposed topographical representations of actual structures. More in the Dutch tradition was Bellotto, who painted Dresden and other cities for princely patrons. The topographical detail in his Warsaw paintings assisted in rebuilding the war-ravaged city in the 20th century.

**(b) Great Britain.**

The topographical tradition was perhaps more varied in Great Britain than elsewhere. Commonplace after the 16th century, and certainly after Canaletto’s stay in the 1740s and 1750s, are panoramic views of London and the Thames, but also conspicuous are views of country estates, ruined abbeys or castles set in a landscape. Interest in topography accelerated after the 1750s, stimulated by the vogue for Sublime, the and Picturesque, and for travel, by a delight in the native English landscape and in medieval antiquities, by patriotic sentiments aroused by the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, and by the transformation of the countryside by the Industrial Revolution, which inspired pictures of railway viaducts and industrial towns. During the next century British artists and publishers produced not only countless watercolours, drawings, prints and illustrated books but also most of the finest examples of the 19th-century tradition of highly commercial, large-scale, walk-in entertainments, such as the Panorama and the Diorama.

It was at the end of the 18th century that Thomas Girtin and J(oseph) M(allord) W(illiam) Turner transformed English watercolour painting. If Girtin’s *Peterborough Cathedral* (1794; Oxford, Ashmolean) or *Rievaulx Abbey* (c. 1800; London, V&A) indicate a predilection for antiquities, his *Eidometropolis* (1801–2), a large-scale, 360° topographical panorama of London exhibited in Wrigley’s Great Rooms, Spring Gardens (untraced), and a series of soft-ground etchings of Paris demonstrate a fascination with the contemporary city. Topographical watercolours by Turner include Picturesque views of Tintern Abbey and Lincoln Cathedral. Later watercolourists in this tradition include David Roberts, Thomas Shotter Boys and
Samuel Prout, the latter much praised by John Ruskin. Topographical plate books and prints, often engravings or lithographs made from the watercolours of Turner, Roberts, Boys, Prout and others, dealt with travel, the countryside, the townscape and antiquities. Among the more celebrated are Roberts’s six-volume *Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia* (1842–9; for illustration see Philae), Thomas Malton’s two-volume *Picturesque Tour through the Cities of London and Westminster* (1792–1801), Boys’s *London as it is* (1842) and John Sell Cotman’s *Architectural Antiquities of Norfolk* (1818). Meanwhile, Boys revolutionized lithographic printing with his chromolithographs in *Picturesque Architecture in Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen etc* (1839). Enthusiasm for topography spread well beyond affluent collectors of watercolours, prints or plate books. The Diorama, which originated in Paris in 1821–2, supplemented the large-scale panorama in offering topographical views to the general public as inexpensive and instructive entertainment. Furthermore, with the invention of economical methods of printing, such periodicals as the *Illustrated London News* not only included topographical views but also provided subscribers with urban panoramas.
Views of London in the 19th century range from documentary to poetic images. Most artists depicted the modern city, and their work is characterized not by the ordered tranquillity of the Dutch townscapes but by an emphasis on frenetic commercial activity, the erection of new buildings and bridges, and streets congested with traffic. Examples include the *Opening of New London Bridge, 1831* (1832; London, Guildhall) by Clarkson Stanfield and *St Pancras Hotel and Station from Pentonville Road: Sunset* (1884; London, Mus. London) by John O’Connor (1830–89). Better known are the images by Monet, who first painted London in 1870 and 1871. He too focused on the modern city, on the new Houses of Parliament (see fig.) and Westminster Bridge, and on commercial bustle along the Thames; unlike the detailed and somewhat dispassionate British topographers, however, he concentrated on the effects created by buildings or lights seen through a veil of mist and fog. Monet painted a second series of London views at the turn of the century (e.g. *Houses of Parliament, Stormy Sky*, 1904, Lille, Mus. B.-A.), and in them the topography of the city virtually disappears into the fog. James McNeill Whistler was another to depict London in this way.

**France.**

The invention of photography in France during the first half of the 19th century lessened the demand there for topographical drawings, prints and paintings. Before its use became widespread, however, a French topographical tradition had developed, with its origins reaching back to the 17th-century panoramas of Paris and views of its buildings, bridges and quays in the prints of Jacques Callot and Israel Silvestre and in the paintings of Abraham de Verwer (c. 1600–c. 1650) and others. Alexandre-Jean Noël (1752–1834) and Nicolas Raguenet (1715–93) carried the panoramic tradition to the next century, while Giuseppe Canella (1788–1847), also a painter of markets and traffic along the bridges and quays of the Seine, continued into the 19th century. Other 18th-century views include the *Demolition of Houses on the Pont au Change* (c. 1788; Munich, Alte Pin.) by Hubert Robert. During the 1820s topographical artists turned their attention to French antiquities, the rural countryside and provincial towns, often depicting the street rather than the panorama. Baron Isidore Taylor’s 20-volume *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l’ancienne France* (1820–78) includes among its hundreds of lithographed views of churches, abbeys and towns Richard Parkes Bonington’s *Rue du Gros-Horloge in Rouen* (1824).
Among painters, Corot portrayed *Chartres Cathedral* (1830; Paris, Louvre) and the *Belfry of Douai* (1871; Paris, Louvre), while his *Notre Dame and the Quay des Orfèvres* (1833; Paris, Carnavalet) depicts the Seine panorama. At mid-century, the focus of topographers shifted once again to Paris, and views by the etcher Charles Meryon and the photographer Charles Marville preserved the Old Paris destroyed during the rebuilding campaign of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann.

Camille Pissarro: *Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning*, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 32 in. (64.8 x 81.3 cm), 1897 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Katrin S. Vietor, in loving memory of Ernest G. Vietor, 1960, Accession ID: 60.174); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art [http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001758](http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001758)

The great era of European topographical art ended with the Impressionists. Before it did so, however, artists throughout Europe and the USA were inspired by the British and French traditions to depict faithfully their cities, towns and antiquities. Eduard Gaertner’s panorama, the six-part *View over Berlin from the Roof of the Friedrichwedsche Church* (1834; Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg, Schinkel-Pav.), is but one among many examples. Meanwhile, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Renoir and Monet painted the grand boulevards, gardens and railway stations of Haussmann’s new Paris, depicting in addition to the city’s energy, motion and ceaseless activity, its light and air (see fig.). Typical is Monet’s *Le Pont de*
l’Europe, Gare St-Lazare (1877; Paris, Mus. Marmottan), with its image of an iron bridge obscured by smoke billowing from a steam locomotive. Such works accurately represent the cityscape and capture a sense of modern life lived within an architectural framework, although they lack the detail of earlier topographical views. By the turn of the 20th century, as Monet’s late London views demonstrate, the focus of artists had shifted. The city itself, however, remained an important theme in the work of such photographers as Eugène Atget and Alfred Stieglitz.

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See also

Colombia, §IV, 2(i): Painting, graphic arts and sculpture: 1819–1930
Landscape painting
Landscape painting, §II, 4(ii): 16th century: The Netherlands
Landscape painting, §II, 6: 18th century
Map, §1: The origins of cartography
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