

FAVORITE

ROBIN KARSON

Founder and director,
Library of American
Landscape History
Photo: Carol Betsch



Turn in the Road
PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906)
c. 1881, oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 28 7/8 in.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; bequest of John T. Spaulding



In a quiet French village painted by Paul Cézanne, no people are visible in the houses' windows and no wind stirs the trees. Nonetheless, Robin Karson, founder and director of the Library of American Landscape History (LALH), senses a pronounced animation here.

"I'm a dancer by training and a choreographer, as well as a landscape historian. For me, there is something about the shape and curve of the road that implies movement," Karson says of the sinuous detail that gives the painting its name, *Turn in the Road*. "The disappearing road is an intensely vital shape — and then there is the sense of possibility it suggests. What lies beyond? It adds to the excitement of the painting."

In a metaphorical sense, Karson changed the course of scholarship in landscape design when she founded the LALH more than 26 years ago. And with the publication of her first book, about the master landscape architect Fletcher Steele (1885–1971), she not only revived his legacy but also imbued the entire discipline with an imprimatur it had never possessed before. LALH has now published more than 40 books about notable American gardens, city parks, cemeteries, even national seashores. Karson has also produced a series of films about landscape design.

She has always admired Cézanne, whether it's one of his classic still lifes or more complicated townscapes/landscapes, like this one in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. As a child, Karson spent much time exploring the land owned by her grandfather — some thousand acres in northern Michigan punctuated by lakes, dense woodlands, beaver ponds, and cedar groves. "I've always had a

strong response to place and especially to certain ones I saw as a child that seemed magical. One of the reasons I love Cézanne's painting is that it transports me to another place and time and, in the same moment, rivets me in the present — my present, as well as Cézanne's."

The built environment is of equal importance to Karson. She describes the assemblage of houses here as abstract shapes that also cohere as a convincing townscape. "It's that tension between two realities that gives any work of art its energy and pace. Anything too literal is flat. Anything too abstract is flat." A few years ago, she choreographed a work for the Amherst Ballet Theatre Company, so the terms and movements of dance also influence her responses to this Cézanne: "There's a sweep, a gesture, that pulls you in and turns you around."

Trained as an art historian at the University of Michigan, Karson has a keen eye for telling details. Here she focuses on the house with a blue roof at far right. "It's such an improbable blue, almost lapis, but after a while, all the subtler shades of blue on the canvas start to vibrate with it. That roof probably didn't have blue shingles, but to Cézanne, it looked blue. An artist can show you something in the world that you might never have seen on your own."