

INTERPRETING SELECTED LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS THROUGH CONTEXT

By

FAIDA Samuel

Department of Fine Art,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria,
faidasamuel@gmail.com
+2348130716021

Abstract

This paper examines the role of context in interpreting selected landscape paintings and argues that artworks gain deeper meaning when viewed within their historical, social, political, and cultural environments. Art does not exist in isolation; it reflects and responds to the circumstances surrounding its production. Drawing on established perspectives in art historical discourse, this paper analyses three landscape paintings: *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh, *The Hay Wain* by John Constable, and *Allegory of the Mining Ponds* by Jacob Enemona Onoja. Through contextual interpretation, the paper shows that Van Gogh's painting reflects his emotional and psychological struggles during his stay in an asylum in France. Constable's work presents a nostalgic vision of rural England during the Industrial Revolution and responds to socio-economic change. Onoja's landscape addresses environmental degradation and human tragedy resulting from mining activities on the Jos Plateau. By examining these works within their respective contexts, the study demonstrates that landscape paintings function not only as representations of nature but also as visual documents of personal experience and societal transformation. Contextual analysis, therefore, remains essential for a comprehensive understanding of landscape art.

Keywords: Interpreting, Landscape, Paintings, Context.

Introduction

The subject of context in art historical discourse is paramount and cannot be overemphasised. Understanding an artwork in isolation often limits its interpretation; therefore, situating it within its broader historical, social, political, and cultural environment is essential for a more comprehensive appreciation and analysis. For this reason, notable scholars have discussed the concept of context from

various perspectives and methodological approaches. Honour & Flemming (2002) state that context means "to consider artworks with references to major ideas and events in religion, politics, and society. Art not only reflects the world around it but also actively engages with it as artists, patrons, and viewers try to shape ideas and events through the visual arts. Lazzari & Schlesier (2008) posit that "context consists of interrelated social and

political conditions that surround a work of art. Context includes a host of factors, such as historical events, economic trends, contemporary cultural developments, religious attitudes, and other artworks of the time, among others. Therefore, whether economic, philosophical, social, political, or cultural, the context in which an artwork is created and the complicity or engagement of the artist within that context are intrinsic to its meaning. A thorough consideration of context enables scholars and viewers alike to interpret artworks more accurately, recognising them as products of specific moments in time that both respond to and shape the societies from which they emerged.

General Overview of the Context of Paintings.

Although the primary focus of this paper is landscape painting, the discussion and examples presented in this subhead address the broader concept of context in paintings, which is not restricted to a particular artistic genre. The inclusion of Chris Ofili's work, for example, is to help establish a conceptual understanding of context in painting. Thus, the rationale for this approach is that, since the central focus of the paper is already on landscape painting, limiting the discussion and examples to that genre alone may result in unnecessary repetition.

Context is pivotal in gaining a deeper understanding and a better appreciation. As earlier noted, Honour & Flemming (2002) state that, “the first step towards understanding context in art is often to explore the roles played by the various individuals and groups involved in the creation, use and experience of a work of art”. Understanding the context of paintings deals with the circumstances in which it was produced, such as the time of existence, place, function, cultural affiliations, geographical locations, and social attitudes an artist experiences, among other circumstances. Considering the experience and circumstances under which an artist produces a painting is crucial for understanding its context. The emotions, environment, and personal or socio-political conditions that influence the artist at the time of creation often infuse the work with layers of meaning that go beyond the visible imagery. By examining these factors, one can gain deeper insights into the artist's intent, the cultural or historical significance of the piece, and how it resonates with or challenges the viewer. Understanding these elements is essential for a comprehensive appreciation of the artwork's narrative and its place within the broader artistic or social landscape. In line

with the aforementioned, arthistoryschool.com (2024) states that, "in understanding the context of a painting, there is a need to consider the artist's attitudes, beliefs, interests, and values, education, training, and life history as well as his psychological state, if that is possible. All these factors will influence how the artist produces his work". arthistoryschool.com (2024) also notes that Vincent van Gogh was an artist who was essentially self-taught and had to cope with medical health problems, personal rejection, and extreme poverty. It is not surprising that his work is often considered to be autobiographical, in the sense that even his still-lives seem to reflect his inner torment.

Adewumi and Kunde, in Deines (2020), posit that "to appreciate the work of art for what it is, one has to recognise its specific determining properties. Perceiving it merely as a material object cannot be sufficient, because some of its determining properties are relational, and hence not directly exhibited. In furtherance, the authors explain that "what is decisive for the identity of a work of art is, therefore, not only its characteristics as a material object but rather the historical and cultural context in which it was made". Sometimes for artwork (s) to fully make meaning,

looking at the aesthetic qualities is not enough; as such, it becomes imperative to holistically look at the different contextual factors surrounding the work. By doing so, one can gain a greater understanding of the artist's intended message and meaning. Honour and Fleming (2002) note that, "irrespective of the formal qualities of artworks to us, works of art cannot be properly or fully understood unless related to their original context, to the beliefs, hopes and fears of the people by whom and for whom they were made". The authors further explain that, in many works of art, there are several superimposed levels of meaning which cannot always be recovered. We only get to understand artworks by paying adequate attention when interrogating them, and they can evoke different feelings and reactions. In agreement with the aforementioned, again, Adewumi and Kunde (2020) state that, the power of context in art also lies in its capacity to evoke diverse forms of emotional and psychological reactions from an audience". The understanding of the contextual attributes of artworks differs, and individuals react to them differently, based on their perception. As such, art has constantly provoked; love, pride and anger, just to mention a few. That is why art is seen to carry different

meanings and messages, and is interpreted differently, depending on who the interpreter is.

Again, Lazzari & Schlesier (2008) opine that "context is not fixed and permanent in artworks from the moment they are made. Rather, context is formed repeatedly, as people in subsequent periods can re-examine and assess the work". In line with the author's submission, art historians or critics from different periods can have different interpretations of the same work of art, depending on the time, present circumstances and geographical location. For example, Anaso in her article *Layers of Interpretations to Jacob Jari's Discarded Objects* and Duniya in His Article *Pragmatism in Jacob Jari's Teaching, Art and Academics* discussed Jari's work titled '*Eclipse*' in different contexts. *Eclipse* is a mixed-media painting where Jari used a collection of paper capsules to produce the work. According to Anaso (2020), "*Eclipse* is represented as a cluster of paper capsules, which basically revolved around concentric circles. The inferred movement of the cluster of papers serves as a metaphor for the jostling for position that may be seen in certain aspects of human existence. The author further notes that

"the jostle, as he calls it, forms an orderly and engaging pattern that is not common in a normal situation of jostle". In almost every ramification of society, people are seen to be struggling for positions. Typically, this can be seen in contemporary Nigerian politics, where politicians are struggling to occupy certain positions by all means. Thus, Anaso's discussion about *Eclipse* can be alluded to the socio-political context.

Duniya (2020), on the other hand, opines that "the paper capsules painting composition is made in such a way that suggests a forceful, swirling movement of currents towards an epicenter. The painting was created in 2013-2014, a period in which refugee camps in the North Eastern part of Nigeria were springing up in numbers, as a result of Boko Haram insurgent attacks on communities". Duniya in furtherance states that, "the painting therefore, encapsulates the refugee's survival struggles, within this camp, particularly when concerned individuals, private or government agencies, bring relief materials to them". Duniya's submission about *Eclipse* can be attributed to the socio-economic context. Consequently, Anaso and Duniya viewed the mixed media painting in different contexts,

depending on how they perceive it; as such, the researcher agreed with their submissions and perspectives about *Eclipse*. One thing for almost every work of art that exist, is the context within which the work is produced. For this reason, artists all over the world are seen to be producing works within certain contexts. Examples of artists that work within certain contexts are: Alberto Giacometti, Rembrandt Van Rijn, Mu'azu Sani, Jacob Onoja and Mustapha Nadama, among several others.

Interrogating the experiences and surroundings of an artist(s) when examining the context of their work is key. This allows viewers not only to grasp the aesthetic qualities of the artist's work but also to connect with the emotional, cultural, psychological, and historical factors that influenced its creation, as seen in the works of Vincent van Gogh, which were produced within specific contexts, reflecting his unique perspectives and circumstances. Works of art are often appropriated to serve purposes quite different from those initially intended. Context heavily influences the meaning of a work and subjects it to multiple interpretations. It always represents someone's point of view and sometimes has the power to provoke and spark

debate, even scandal. For example, a work exhibited by Chris Ofili titled *The Holy Virgin Mary* provoked a reaction by some New Yorkers. As described by Janson and Janson (2006), the work was shown in late 1999 during an exhibition titled *Sensation*, by Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection, at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. A British, of African descent, Ofili used dots of paint, glitter, map pins, and collaged images of genitalia from magazines to depict a black Virgin Mary. Instead of hanging on the wall, the painting is placed on two large wads of elephant dung, which had been a signature of the artist's large canvases since 1991. Several reactions and interpretations of Ofili's creation filled the exhibition space and the media. Figure 1 depicts *the Holy Virgin Mary*

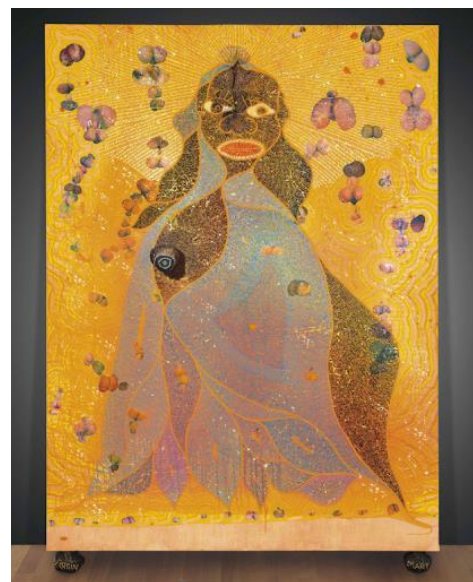


Figure 1, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Chris Ofili, 1996. Paper Collage, Oil Paint, Glitter, Polyester Resin,

In the opinion of Janson and Janson (2006), "many art historians, critics and other viewers found the work remarkably beautiful-glittering and shimmering, with a delicate, ephemeral otherworldly aura. Many Catholics were repulsed by Ofili's homage to the Virgin. Consequently, they interpreted the dung and the so-called pornography as sacrilegious. The authors further state that, "the greatest attack came from New York's mayor of that period, Mayor Rudolf Giuliani. Rudolf Giuliani, a Catholic, was so outraged that he tried to eliminate the city funding for the museum".

All of this stems from an individual's interpretation of a painting. The meaning that a piece of artwork can generate differs widely, depending on who is viewing it, leading to many reactions and interpretations. This diversity in perception highlights the subjective nature of art, where each viewer brings their own experiences, emotions, and perspectives to the artwork, resulting in unique and varied interpretations. Barrett interprets the Mayor's outrageous reaction to Ofili's piece differently. According to Barrett (2003), "we believe that his sensibilities were shocked by the belief that Mother Mary happened to be some colour other than the colour that he has accepted for

everything good and pure and right and white". Placing this painting in context, if it were displayed in Nigeria, the portrayal of the Holy Virgin Mary as a Black woman would likely be greatly appreciated, fostering a profound sense of cultural identity and inclusivity among the Black community. On the other hand, exhibiting this racially conceptualised artwork in New York might provoke mixed reactions due to the city's diverse cultural, religious, and social perspectives. This contrast shows how the understanding of art is profoundly influenced by the cultural and societal context in which it is presented. It is in line with this thought that Janson and Janson (2006) say that "because the context for looking at art constantly changes, our interpretations and insights into art and entire periods evolve as well."

Interpreting Landscape Paintings Through Context

Some notable landscape artists have produced paintings influenced by a variety of contexts, including their environment, present circumstances, allegorical context, history and geographical locations, among other factors. These elements shape the way they perceive and represent the natural world, infusing their works with a unique sense of place and time. These artists manage to capture more than just

the physical landscape. Their paintings often reflect the emotional and cultural nuances of the world they inhabit, offering viewers a deeper understanding of the paintings.

For example, Plessis (2021) reports that, when Van Gogh painted the *Starry Night* in 1889, he was staying in the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole mental asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in the southern part of France. The events leading up to his admission to the hospital were quite tumultuous and involved a confrontation with his acquaintance and fellow post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, and Van Gogh cutting off a part of his ear. He reportedly experienced a severe psychotic break after these events. During his stay at the hospital, he had two rooms: one was a bedroom, and the other was utilised as a painting studio. Plessis (2021) states further that, "his subject matter was of the asylum and its surrounding gardens, although he was able to move around more than most of the other patients. His east-facing room had a view of the French Alpilles mountain range, which inspired a lot of his landscapes". While Plessis's submission is well presented, his take could benefit from a more critical examination of how these circumstances directly influenced Van Gogh's artistic

choices. For instance, he mentions that Van Gogh's surroundings inspired much of his landscape work, but does not mention how this inspiration translated into the unique stylistic elements seen in *Starry Night*.

Silverman (2000) opines that "Starry Night is frequently analysed in the context of van Gogh's personal struggles and emotional state. Painted during his stay at the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, the swirling night sky is often interpreted as a reflection of van Gogh's turbulent mental state. The author further opines that, "the painting also represents van Gogh's fascination with the vastness of the universe and his desire to express the emotional and spiritual resonance of nature". Thus, *Starry Night* can be seen as a reflection of Van Gogh's personal life and experiences, particularly his struggles with mental health. The painting can be positioned within the context of his emotional and psychological challenges, capturing the intensity of his inner turmoil. The swirling, turbulent night sky is thought to symbolise the chaos and unrest he experienced during this period of his life, while also revealing his deep fascination with the mysteries of the universe. Figure 2 shows *Starry Night*.



Figure 2, *Starry Night*, Vincent Van Gogh, Oil on Canvas, 74 cm x 92 cm, 1889– 1889. Source: <https://sanctuarymentalhealth.org/2021/03/04/the-starry-night/>

According to Plessis (2023), *The Hay Wain*, by John Constable, was originally titled *Landscape: Noon* by the artist, but reportedly his friend, Archdeacon John Fisher, gave it the substitute title of *The Hay Wain*, possibly due to the depicted wagon in the center of the composition. *Wain* means wagon, and it would have been utilised for transporting hay, collected from the surrounding fields. Again, Plessis (2023) states that "it is important to note that, when John Constable painted *The Hay Wain*, along with his other landscape paintings, he was living through the Industrial Revolution in England. With this came new modes of enterprise and working opportunities in factories-urbanisation was progressing, but so too was civil unrest". Additionally, the author states that it reverts to a time of calmness in nature, and reportedly also Constable's childhood. Some believe that Constable touched upon the stresses

prevalent between the farmers and the farmworkers during that time, due to the loss of work from the industrial developments. His depiction of the workers, further away in the background, in *The Hay Wain*, has been regarded as almost symbolic of this.

Reynolds (1965) states that, "*The Hay Wain* is often discussed within the context of the Romantic movement in art, which emphasised a deep connection with nature and the rural landscape. Constable's work is celebrated for its idyllic depiction of the English countryside, portraying a scene of rural tranquillity that contrasts with the industrialisation occurring during the same period. In furtherance, Reynolds postulates that, "the painting reflects Constable's nostalgia for a vanishing pastoral way of life and has been analysed in relation to the socio-economic changes of early 19th-century England".

The information provided by Plessis and Reynolds is important and valuable, especially in highlighting the historical context in which *The Hay Wain* was created. The discussion about the Industrial Revolution and its impact on rural life adds depth to the understanding of Constable's work. Constable's choice to depict a peaceful, rural scene during widespread societal change can be seen as a deliberate effort to preserve and idealise a disappearing way of life. Reynolds

believes that *The Hay Wain* reflects Constable's nostalgia for a vanishing pastoral way of life and the socio-economic changes of early 19th-century England. However, the author could have deepened his submission by stating how Constable's personal experiences and artistic intentions shaped his portrayal of the rural landscape. For instance, how did Constable's own upbringing in the countryside influence his romanticised depiction of rural life?

The Hay Wain is more than just a beautiful landscape painting; it is a work rooted in the historical and economic context of early 19th-century England. Constable's painting reflects the tensions of his time, the clash between the old rural ways and the new industrial order. Through his depiction of the English countryside, Constable offers a vision of a cherished and endangered world, capturing the complex emotions of a society in transition. The painting's nostalgic tone and subtle social commentary make it a powerful piece that resonates with the economic and historical realities of its era. Figure 3 shows *The Hay Wain*.



Figure 3, *The Hay Wain*, John Constable, Oil on canvas, 130.2 cm × 185.4 cm, 1821 Sources: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240509-why-the-iconic-english-painting-the-hay-wain-by-john-constable-is-not-what-it-seems>

Onoja has created numerous landscape paintings that invite reflection and conversation on diverse challenges facing society. Some of his work, such as *Allegory of the Mining Ponds*, is depicted within an allegorical context. Through his landscape paintings, he has created visual narratives addressing specific societal issues in an allegorical manner.

According to Onoja (2024), "*Allegory of Mining Ponds* is basically about mining activities that are happening on the Jos Plateau. Jos Plateau is known for several mining activities, especially tin mining activities, and a few other minerals that they have. The artist further states that,

Staying on the Jos Plateau and having visited several mining ponds, the stories we hear about the mining pond are disheartening. Children going there to swim and then sinking, people going to the mining ponds to fish, and they plunge into the place, creating a lot of problems. But more so, the mining activities have damaged the land. Several of the landscapes that should have been used for agriculture can no longer be used because the places are no longer fertile for agricultural purposes.

In furtherance, Onoja (2024) notes that, so the story in this work is so vast and you will see water bodies within the painting, you will see lush green vegetation within the painting and the whole idea is this, if this place that is looking so fine, people can take idea to make it look the same way in the natural environment, then we would have made a lot of difference. Furthermore Onoja, (2022) states that, “these ponds which serve as water collection points for irrigation and fishing activities also become hazardous to the local population, especially children, who drown in them while being adventurous and sometimes fall into deep wells”. The artist continued “while I am enjoying the aesthetics of the scene due to the trappings of the landforms, I am also passing a message to the relevant agencies to check the destruction and defacing of the land of our beautiful Plateau”.

Contextually, in “*Allegory of the Mining Ponds*”, Onoja transforms a serene landscape into a metaphor for environmental destruction, human loss and the balance between nature’s beauty and its degradation. The painting’s tranquil composition with ponds, lush vegetation and distant hills suggests a peaceful natural paradise. Yet, beneath this aesthetic appeal lies a haunting reality. The

ponds, remnants of extensive mining activities on the Jos Plateau, are silent witnesses to suffering, displacement and ecological collapse. The twin ponds, central to the composition, symbolise both life and peril. The figures at the pathway’s visual edge, perhaps innocent children, serve as a reminder of the tragedies that frequently unfold in these deceptive waters. As Onoja recounts, these mining ponds, initially created by human hands in pursuit of wealth, now claim lives and render once fertile lands barren.

The landscape painting is not merely a depiction of a landscape, but a visual call for intervention, an appeal to policymakers, environmentalists and local communities to reclaim and rehabilitate what has been lost. Overall, through “*Allegory of the Mining Ponds*”, Onoja draws the viewer to look beyond the surface, to recognise the silent suffering embedded in the land and to imagine a future where nature is not just observed but actively restored. See figure 4, *Allegory of the Mining Ponds*.



Figure 4, *Allegory of the Mining Ponds*, Jacob Enemona Onoja, Acrylic on Canvas. 33x 44 cm, 2020. Source: The Artist

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that context plays a vital role in interpreting landscape paintings. Art does not exist in isolation. It reflects the historical period, social conditions, cultural values, and personal experiences of the artist. By examining *Starry Night*, *The Hay Wain*, and *Allegory of the Mining Ponds*, this paper demonstrates how different contexts shape artistic expression and meaning. Thus, Van Gogh's painting reflects his emotional struggles and fascination with

nature during his stay at the asylum. Constable's work presents a nostalgic view of rural England during the Industrial Revolution and responds to social and economic change. Onoja's landscape addresses environmental destruction and human loss caused by mining activities on the Jos Plateau. In each case, understanding the surrounding circumstances provides deeper insight into the intention and message of the artwork. Additionally, the paper affirms that contextual analysis enriches interpretation and prevents superficial readings of landscape paintings. When viewers consider the artist's environment, experiences, and societal influences, they gain a fuller appreciation of both the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the artwork.

References

- Adewumi, C. K. & Kunde, T. M (2020) *The Role and Importance of Context in Art*, A Journal of Arts Published by the University of Jos, Fine And Applied Arts Journal Vol. 1 No.2. pp. 231, 234
- Anaso, K.U. (2020). *Layers of Interpretations of Jacob Jari's Discarded Objects*. Perspectives and Encounters on Jacob Jari's Artistic Sojourn: A Festschrift for Professor Jacob Jari @ 60. Published by the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. p38
- Barrett, T. (2003). *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. P59
- Duniya, G.G. (2020). *Pragmatism in Jacob Jari's Teaching, Art and Academics* Perspectives and Encounters on Jacob Jari's Artistic Sojourn: A Festschrift for Professor Jacob Jari @ 60. Published by the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pp 175-176
- Honour, H and Fleming, J. (2002). *The Visual Arts: A History*. Sixth Edition. Pearson Education, Inc. Pp vii. 27
- Janson, H.W. and Janson, A.F. (2006). *A Basic History of Western Art*. Seventh Edition. Pearson Education, Inc. P4
- Lazzari, M, & Schilesier, D (2008). *Exploring art* (3rd ed.). Published by Clark Baxter, New York. P 85.
- Onoja, J.E (2022). *Allegory of the Mining Ponds*. Landscape and More 6, The Periscope An Exhibition Catalogue. Published by: Diadem Art Gallery, Jos – Nigeria. P17
- Onoja, E. J. (2024). *An Interview with Onoja Enemona Jacob* at his office, Department of Fine and Applied Art, University of Jos, Jos on 28th October 2024
- Plessis, A. (2021) *Starry Night* van Gogh – In-Depth Analysis and Facts. Retrieved from <https://artincontext.org/starry-night-van-gogh/>. On August 24, 2024
- Plessis, A. (2023). *The Hay Wain* by John Constable – A Detailed Hay Wain Analysis. Retrieved from <https://artincontext.org/the-hay-wain-by-john-constable/>. On August 24, 2024.
- Reynolds, G. (1965) *Constable: The Natural Painter*. First Edition, London: Published by Thames & Hudson. McGraw-Hill.
- Silverman, D. (2000). *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*. Published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York: P213