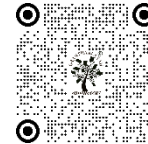


Original Article

THE KOSMOS OF NATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF ART: AN ARTISTIC APPROACH TO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the representation of nature through art, with the aim of analysing various artistic and cultural practices through which scholars and environmentalists have sought to understand and elucidate the historical interaction between humans and the environment. Based on the methodological approach adopted, the study presents an analysis of documents relating to artistic, social and environmental foundations, in accordance with Donald Worster's theory that "environmental history and nature complement one another". In this context, it becomes evident that artistic production references certain artists inspired by nature whose creative processes have always interconnected through inspiration, pictorial technique or the texture of natural materials. As a means of preserving the beauty of the natural world, photography uses as a tool for exploring environmental biodiversity, since this artistic expression also reflects the cultural character of art. Thus, it is observed that humanism, which was perpetuated by the artistic symbolism of nature and poetry, was replaced by modernism, with the aim of creating innovative and avant-garde aesthetic transformations; it began to convey freer emotions and ideas with new meanings, transcending the symbol of humanity to the environmental awareness of new generations.

Keywords: Artistic Representation, Creativity, Nature, Environmental History, Landscape

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the concept of nature, as a reflection of the evolution of philosophy and human thought closely linked to humanity's political and social transformations, as well as to scientific, technological and artistic advances. In the Dutch tradition of still life (stilleven), the depiction of inanimate objects appeared to lack movement; however, for Michèle-Caroline Heck (1998), these compositions went beyond mere static representation by evoking everyday life and commercial rituals, within a historical context marked by instability and economic tensions, reflected in the painters' visual language. In the post-war period (1618–1648), the financial crisis in various countries contributed to the emergence of Vanitas paintings, which were later valued for their symbolic and aesthetic significance Schneider (2009).

In the context of pre-capitalist Holland, still life took on a critical function regarding the consumption and ostentation of the new elites, simultaneously highlighting the ephemeral nature and inevitable physical decay of man, regardless of his socio-economic position Schneider (2009).

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Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the expansion of artistic practices and technological development triggered a profound transformation in aesthetic thought, in which the artistic concept redefines through the composition of objects and natural elements, incorporating environmental and ecological concerns that have become central to the discourse of contemporary art.

PROBLEM

STARTING QUESTIONS

Art and nature are themes chosen with the aim of creating the conditions for the creation of works resulting from artistic activities, considered a historical reference for communicating and acquiring knowledge. Some artists drew inspiration from the colors of nature to create abstract works, while others used natural materials for sculptures, installations, and murals with the aim of preserving the beauty of the natural world, as well as using photography to represent environmental diversity.

From an ideological perspective, it was necessary to raise a series of questions:

- In what context does art express an awareness of nature?
- What factors contribute to the preservation of art in the natural environment?
- What does the integration of natural art into ecotourism mean?
- What are the most relevant aspects for the artistic practice of landscape?
- What is the relationship between art and nature?
- After these questions, we can conclude that creative art manifests itself in the natural world in an inspiring and expressive way.

STATE OF THE ART

NATURE/ART

Throughout the history of art, artistic expressions of nature have been part of the artistic journey (painters, sculptors and visual artists) of all eras, featuring Renaissance paintings and symbols from the natural world.

Regarding the relationship between nature and art, Lisboa and Kindel note: “environmental art awakens sensations and feelings in human beings” (2012, p. 61) and “artistic manifestations provoked by cultural and social challenges, experiences and thoughts” [Ecycle \(2016\)](#).

From this perspective, the concept serves to reinforce the idea of existence in everyday life, in which “art can serve as a vital support for humanity” [Oliveira \(2015\)](#).

The influence of nature on various art forms—painting, music and literature—encompasses creativity, considered a link between humanity and the natural world that continues to influence future generations of creative individuals and ensures nature remains a source of inspiration and artistic exploration.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article is to examine nature as represented in art as a conduit for stimuli and an expression of the natural world. The research conducted using a qualitative approach, drawing on an extensive bibliography, historical documentation from various periods, and works by a wide range of artists, all of which provided the basis for the analysis in this study.

In the course of the research, it became clear that discussing environmental issues from an artistic perspective involves examining how people organise themselves structurally within society alongside other cultures, in social relations and within the environment in which they live.

Throughout the study, it is possible to observe theoretical references from authors and artists who have fostered links in strengthening partnerships between art, nature and environmental education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the history of art, still life has always been an integral part of the artistic landscape, surrounded by religious themes, portraits and landscapes, which have shaped the development of this style. The style of the works of painters, Pieter Aertsen (1508–1575) and Jacopo Bassano (1510–1592) are scenes of everyday life and religion. In the modern era, from the 20th to the 21st century, artistic changes emerged at a conceptual and technological level, bringing a fluidity to the artist’s motivations within a contemporary context. Various artistic movements emerged in the 1960s related to nature, such as Land Art, in which artists used natural materials to create their works. In the work “Christ in the House of Mary and Martha”, it presented as “a false image” in which the observer, as Stoichita notes, is a meta-representation. Over time, with regard to the illusion of the image, “the meta-pictorial character of

representation” [Stoichita \(1999\)](#) emerges – “Flowers in a Jug” (1480–90) by Hans Memling (1430–1494) and “Vanitas” achieved notoriety. “The skull represents the negative portrait. The front is the space intended for the image, whilst the reverse constitutes the truth, in which the ‘still life’ appears more ‘dead’ (...)” [Stoichita \(1999\)](#).

In this context, the artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo demonstrated an interest in nature and objects in his works, with the ‘Four Seasons’ series, in particular ‘Vertumnus’ [Figure 1](#), standing out as a highlight of his career. In this work, he demonstrates how nature, beyond being visual material, becomes a cultural and historical symbol, enabling art to establish an ongoing dialogue between power, humanity and the natural world, that endures as a source of inspiration and artistic reflection over time.

Figure 1



Figure 1 “The Four Seasons” ‘Vertumnus’, Giuseppe Arcimboldo.

NATURE / MODERN ART

Nature and modern art is a central theme in the work of Paul Cézanne, the leading modern artist of the 20th century, transforming painting into a language, which inspired artists such as Picasso, Braque and others.

Cézanne reformulated the traditional artistic perspective of still lifes, having developed a new technique for representing objects and arranging colours and forms on the surface of the canvas, as evidenced in Still Life with Teapot and Fruit (1896), [Figure 2](#), conveying dimensions of “wisdom and spirituality” [Focillon \(1988\)](#). For Cézanne, the work Basket of Apples (1895) [Figure 3](#) constituted a pictorial object, whilst [Coccia \(2016\)](#) notes, “The Kósmos traverses the cognitive realm”.

Figure 2

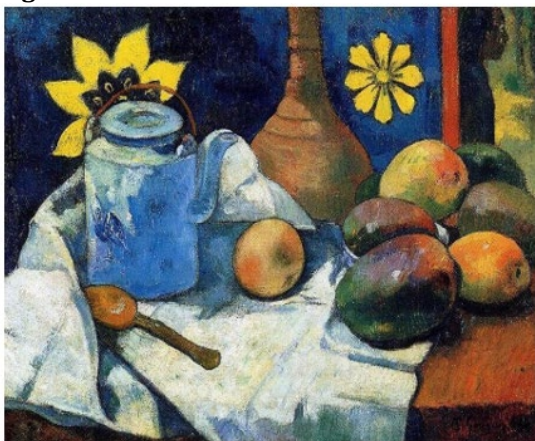


Figure 2 Still Life with Teapot and Fruit (1896) by Paul Cézanne.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Basket of Apples (1895) by Paul Cézanne.

Gauguin and Cézanne worked according to their own interests; however, Gauguin abandoned studio work, preferring experimentalism.

Lange-Berndt, in [Materiality \(2015\)](#), refers to the performance in the “use of thoughts” for the creation of the work, a concept that is akin to the practices of Wolfgang Laib (1950) and his installations of natural elements, *Pollen from Pine* (2003). In the works of Laib and Andy Goldsworthy, for the installation *Rowan Leaves Laid Around a Hole* (1987, Yorkshire Sculpture Park), the artist did not manipulate the natural materials, prioritising the preservation of Nature. In this context, [Lange-Berndt \(Ed.\). \(2015\)](#) described “the material, a kind of labyrinth”, suggesting a sensory, conceptual and complex experience.

NATURAL LANDSCAPE/ART

According to Kenneth Clark in his work, *Landscapes into Art*, the landscape emerged simultaneously in Italian and Flemish art. However, for Brunelleschi, landscapes represented ‘man and nature’ and ‘a renaissance of science’; the historian, raising doubts about the painting, considered the work ‘The Tempest’ is a Renaissance painting mysterious by the Italian master Giorgione dated between 1506 and 1508 [Figure 4](#).

Figure 4



Figure 4 The Tempest, by Giorgione (1477). <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/giorgione/tempest/>.

In this argument, ‘The Tempest’ was the first landscape painting, according to Cauquelin, for its beauty, Simon Schama (1996): “from a cultural point of view. (...)”. In art history, nature was represented through divinity, the mythology of the gods and allegories, Steven Bourassa, in the book ‘Aesthetics of Landscapes’ on the aesthetics of the landscape, and in Emily Brady’s book ‘Aesthetics of the Natural Environment’, in which she refers to the alteration of the natural environment for ecological reasons.

The void represents in biblical passages during a period when pictorial compositions with two-dimensional characteristics had little depth. Giotto di Bondone (1266–1337) employed techniques of perspective and depth in his images and explored artistic techniques in the frescoes of the [Figure 5](#) “Scrovegni Chapel between 1303 and 1310”.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Giotto, Frescoes, Chapel Giotto, Scrovegni.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) associated the flood with waves, ‘touching’ in an authentic way without neglecting the poetic sense of Capra in ‘The Soul of Leonardo da Vinci’; the flood [Figure 6](#) is part of nature, ‘...nor by the overflowing of the sea up to the tops of the mountains’.

Figure 6



Figure 6 Images of the Flood, 1514, Leonardo da Vinci, Windsor Collection.

In this initial analysis, Da Vinci rejected the theory that “...the movement of the sea against the flow of rivers cannot support objects heavier than itself”. As for the prevalence of shells in these parts of the local landscape, “within the rocks they are unable to move”. He concluded his analysis: “Between one layer of rock and another, there are traces of worms that crawled through them whilst they were still wet”, reinforcing his theory, which had held sway until then. Drawing on scientific records and analyses, Da Vinci noted the presence of marine fossils on mountain peaks, although he was unaware of the local geological area, as described in Jo Marchant’s **Fossil Secrets of the Da Vinci Codex**. Da Vinci understood that all natural phenomena were in harmony, thus “The animal lives in its natural environment and man in his habitat.”

This is how we see the emergence of so-called genre painting, which encompassed seascapes and still lifes – one of the genres that became characteristic of 17th-century Dutch painting – as well as rural and urban landscapes, which featured prominently in

art as a reflection of the reality of the world. However, European artists only achieved artistic autonomy between the 18th and 19th centuries in the Neoclassical and Romantic styles, with the emergence of Aesthetics. According to Argan, in Modern Art, “an art that neither imitates nor represents an artistic category, as Anne Cauquelin puts it; the landscape comes to represent a place in paintings when it ceases to be a backdrop and becomes a pictorial composition”.

THE INTERPRETATION OF NATURE THROUGH ART

Nature inspired philosophy, literature, and visual arts in the search for life in the universe. Within this context, painters such as John Constable, Alexander Cozens, Caspar Friedrich, and William Turner emerged, preferring the aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime.

The painter Cozens demonstrated that nature inspires the artist and allows the connection of sensations in painting; the sublime was defined in 1757 by Edmund Burke and later theorized by Immanuel Kant.

Among the characteristics of the sublime, solitude and anguish were feelings that stood in contrast to beauty, whereas the qualities of the picturesque links to the divinity of the human being.

In the 19th century, nature and its elements (landscapes, gardens...) represented a prime setting for the expression of feelings and emotions experienced in the natural environment. In the first half of the 19th century, various forms of expression of feelings and emotions emerged within the artistic milieu of the time. Whilst Turner used bold brushstrokes of colour, as shown in [Figure 7](#) depicting a steamship on the ocean, Constable employed colour to illustrate experiences and historic sites [Figure 8](#); for Friedrich, however, it was the aesthetics of the sublime in depicting the traveller's contemplation and solitude [Figure 9](#) whilst revelling in the immensity of nature.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth (1842) William Turner.

Figure 8



Figure 8 The Cornfield (1826) John Constable.

Figure 9



Figure 9 Contemplation of the Sea of Clouds, (1818) Gaspar David Friedrich.

THE EVOLUTION OF STILL LIFE DEPICTIONS OF ANIMAL AND PLANT LIFE

Throughout his artistic career, his ability to convey expressiveness was evident, highlighting his interest in the manipulation of light and shade, chromatic harmony and textures, reflecting the intensity and beauty characteristic of Dutch painting. The Vanitas still life Still Life with Flowers and Skull (1642) [Figure 10](#) incorporates the concept of Memento Mori, in which 'the skull is the negative of the portrait': the front face represents the apparent image, whilst the reverse symbolises the underlying reality.

Figure 10



Figure 10 "Vanitas, with Flowers and Skull" (1642) Adrian Van Utrecht.

In the 17th century, Dutch artists excelled in still life painting, such as Utrecht (1599–1652) and Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), who highlighted the beauty and transience of the objects depicted. Utrecht, following in Ruysch's tradition, explored themes such as mortality and materialism in his still lifes. In these works of art, among the objects depicted, there is the presence of a gold clock symbolising the fleeting nature of life and time, the transience of flowers and a display of wealth, as can be seen in, [Figure 11](#), Still Life in a Glass Vase with Flowers.

Figure 11



Figure 11 Still Life in a (Glass Vase with flowers 1776) Rachel Ruysch,

In art, plant life often served a purely decorative function. As [Coccia \(2016\)](#) observes, “developed countries regard them as superfluous”. The creation of a “false image” amounts to a deliberate illusion; according to Stoichita, this is a meta-representation, exemplified in works such as [Figure 12](#), The Paschal Lamb or Mystical Lamb.

Figure 12



Figure 12 The Paschal Lamb or Mystical Lamb (c. 1660-70, Évora Regional Museum) by the renaissance painter Josefa de Óbidos.

The lamb symbolises Christ, constituting a religious reference that reflects in the presence of flowers and grapes, elements associated with the biblical narrative. The frame of the ‘false image’ helps to create an illusion that extends into the space perceived by the observer. During this period, this model achieved great renown, enhancing the illusion of the image in contexts of wealth and giving rise to what [Stoichita \(1999\)](#) refers to as “metapictorial”, as exemplified in works such as Flowers in a Jug, Hans Memling, [Figure 13](#).

Figure 13



Figure 13“Flowers in a Jug” Hans Memling.

In this way, the representation of the Virgin, centered on the vase of flowers, incorporates elements of Vanitas, giving the still life a dimension of reflection on the ephemerality and transition of life, assuming a negative meaning [Figure 14](#), Vanitas, 1524 Barthel Bruyn de oude (1493-1553/1557).

Figure 14



Figure 14 Vanitas, 1524 Barthel Bruyn de oude (1493-1553/1557).

THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN-EARTH-LIFE / MENDIETA WOHLLEBEN'S INTERPRETATION IN “THE HIDDEN WISDOM OF NATURE”

In the face of inequalities in rights and the growing appreciation of nature over time, human rationality is of little importance, especially when confronted with climate change and capitalism. In this context, the artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) attracted attention with her installation Tree of Life (1979), [Figure 15](#), which establishes a symbolic relationship between nature and fertility.

Figure 15



Figure 15 Images of Yagul (from the Silhouette series) photography, 1973 and Hojas Rojas 1977, Mendieta

Mendieta constructs her artistic practice as a process of self-representation in which the life cycle—birth, growth, reproduction and death—is likened to a continuous movement of creation and recreation, in which life and death coexist inseparably [Inácio \(2016\)](#). This perspective brings the female body closer to the rhythms of nature, establishing a poetics that articulates corporeality, temporality and territory. Just as trees grow and spread their roots in the soil, Mendieta positions her body on the tree, which is vertically oriented towards the sky, covered in mud or plant matter.

In “Tree of Life”, this fusion of body and nature highlights an archaic symbolism of motherhood, in which the female body serves as a generator and mediator between the earth and the Cosmos. In “Standing”, meanwhile, the verticality of the figure evokes a Christian interpretation of motherhood associated with sacrifice, fertility and transcendence, questioning female identity simultaneously in the biological, spiritual and political spheres. In a convergent manner, though from distinct contexts, Clara Menéres (1943–2018) developed over decades a body of work that traverses feminist, erotic and religious art, navigating the realms of the body, desire and the sacred. In Mendieta’s work, this interconnection manifests itself through the concept of “Woman–Earth–Life”, in which the female body is incorporated into the landscape, within the realm of Land Art, by introducing issues of gender and ancestry. Wohlleben’s interpretation in “The Hidden Life of Trees” contributes to this reflection: through restrictions on photosynthesis, mother trees supply nutrients via interconnected roots. This ecological dynamic symbolically reinforces an ethic of care and interdependence, metaphorically associated with motherhood in the bonds of nourishment, protection and the continuity of life. “that of nursing one’s children” [Wohlleben \(2017\)](#).

ARTISTS INSPIRED BY NATURE

A In this analysis, these artists reveal a multifaceted field of research based on aesthetics, humanity and the environment.

ANSEL ADAMS, artist and nature photographer.

CLAUDE MONET revolutionised painting and explored techniques using sunlight throughout the day.

VINCENT VAN GOGH challenged symbolism in his own emotional struggles, making an impact through his critical and innovative spirit.

MAYA LIN inserted natural elements into her works, and creating a reflective and emotional experience.

ANDY GOLDSWORTHY used installations made from natural materials in the Japanese tradition of wabi-sabi.

BEATRIX POTTER was an advocate for environmental preservation, conservation and environment education.

HOKUSAI is renowned for his mastery of the Japanese landscape art form, ukiyo-e.

JAMES CAMERON, known worldwide for ‘Avatar’, pushed the boundaries of film technology and the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) for to create a realistic underwater alien world.

CONCLUSION

The central focus of this research concerns the relationship between human beings, nature and art, in which nature is one of the most significant themes in painting for the visual recognition of the depicted reality, linked to the enjoyment of the image. It is evident that, for some artists, still lifes have always inspired new experiences, narratives and pictorial materials in the creation of works of art. Indeed, the study shows that certain characteristics of artistic conception and representation are prominent in the practice of this type of painting. Similarly, Victor I. Stoichita notes that, in relation to European painting, the early forms of Portuguese still life emerged as peripheral, marginal elements, appearing most frequently in the lower and lateral areas of altarpiece paintings, situated between the real world and the depicted world.

In Arcimboldo’s work “The Four Seasons”, inspired by artistic creation, nature reinforce as a central element of meaning, interpretation and aesthetic expression.

It is evident that, throughout the history of art, still lifes have served as a form of aesthetic experimentation and critical reflection, as seen in the works of renowned artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Cézanne and Ana Mendieta, in their exploration of the relationship between artistic creation and environmental awareness.

From this perspective, the artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) established, through her artistic practice, a connection between the feminine and Nature, as a foundation for a return to one’s origins, in her work “Tree of Life” (1979) as an allegory of fertility and motherhood. From an artistic point of view, artists inspired by nature were cite, using innovative techniques to advocate for environmental protection and artistic development.

It should be noted that in art, nature is usually associated with fertility, a metaphor for the season linked to reproduction and the creation of future generations. In conclusion, it is considered that the influence of nature on the arts is an integral part of creativity and beauty, which, beyond traditionalism, has reached historic heights in contemporary art in a conceptual and challenging way, reflecting current circumstances.

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