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# LANDSCAPE VS ENVIRONMENT, PAINTING VS CONCEPTUAL ART

How landscapes are understood in human life can be linked to successive stages in the evolution of art and imagery. How humans perceive the world around us is reflected in how artists craft the messages they want to convey.

An alternative reproduction  
of a painting by Picasso,  
applying the style  
of Kandinsky



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Paintings, understood as artistically created images, have certainly evolved over the centuries, just as the reality surrounding us has. This evolution has affected not only such formal aspects as composition, effects, colors, and expression, but also the ways in which paintings are perceived, their role in the social reality, and their position in the artistic world. If I were to try to pinpoint the origins of the conscious creation of images, I would not look to the revolution touched off by Impressionism, regarded as the catalyst of modern art. Rather, to find the underpinnings of how we understand paintings, I would instead explore the more fundamental human need to commune with something that has been intimately linked to imagery from the outset – namely landscapes.

## Landscapes

The relationship between nature and art has been tangible since the very beginnings of artistic expression, and it is not simply confined to landscape painting. Rather, landscapes are even recognized as a subject of inquiry in one of the branches of philosophy, namely esthetics. When communing with nature, we analyze it in various ways, and the functions it serves for us vary from knowledge acquisition and exploration to recreation and leisure. When we contemplate nature, we may focus our attention on details or we see it as a whole. Behind every glance, there is an analysis of the reflections that we have when we look at a work of art or that artists have when they paint. We explore, use, and alter landscapes for our own purposes, or we marvel at them and write down the results of our esthetic exaltation. Such a contemplative approach was already well-known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when landscape painting triumphed. It is also still evident today, in the age of mass tourism, so often based on collecting “beautiful images” snapped at must-see sights. The very word “landscape” evokes associations with esthetic characteristics, which we consider in terms of perspective, proportions, compositional qualities, and the interplay of colors.

In my analysis, the evolution of art is inextricably linked to the evolution of how landscapes are viewed and understood in human life. Let us start off with the moment when artists were liberated from the expectation to produce mimetic representations of the world and could construct compositions, frequently in isolation from what they actually observed. By this,

I mean the arrival of Impressionism, or the beginning of the modern era in the history of art. I will not go into detail about the historical background of the revolution it initiated or analyze the tenets posited in the first Impressionist manifestos. Rather, I will only stress that the first Impressionist paintings coincided in time with the invention of the photographic camera, which plays an important role here. It symbolizes the fact that artists came to be relieved from the mission to create photographic reproductions of reality. From then on, they could devote themselves to a different, more profound analysis of such phenomena as the interplay of light and shadow, composition, dynamics, and expression – by studying the painting itself, rather than a scene it was meant to be capturing on canvas. Consequently, they switched their attention from what they saw to what they were creating, and what they were creating was something qualitatively new – the beginning and the first stage of the evolution of art – and something closely linked to the evolution of the perception of landscapes in human life.

## Presentation of art

Landscapes as we know them are spaces of visible human interference. We could describe them as “artificial” and more or less conscious uses of natural scenery and its adaptation to human needs. When confronted with natural scenery, humans become creators, shaping the space around them, exploring and altering the relationship between its various links. They design entire landscapes, engage in construction projects, and make plans, thus directly affecting the visible features of the space surrounding them. They are aware of their position and role in the world, and they are mindful of their impact on their surroundings.

This phase in a sense coincided with two stages in the evolution of art. The first of these was the *stage of objects*, where importance was attached to paintings and sculptures with all of the creative influence they wielded through their form, color, and dynamics. The second was the *stage of space* as a higher form of thinking about images. In this stage in the evolution of art, importance was attached no longer to artistic objects alone, but also the relationships between them. This approach to works of art was undoubtedly influenced by the way they were presented. Known since the beginnings of art exhibitions, cramped living rooms with paintings covering the walls from floor to ceiling, like wallpaper, were replaced by revolutionary and minimalistic “white cube” galleries, or spaces where the key role was played not only by works of art, but also by how we viewed them. Viewers are here inside the artwork, perceiving it from various changing

perspectives. They explore how one painting affects another, and how they interact with the free space and the viewing axes in the exhibition gallery. This next stage of the evolution of art, namely the *stage of the evolution of paintings*, prompts us to look beyond the frame, to see artifacts from a broader perspective without focusing only on them. What the eye can see is something more than compositions, rhythms, and forms. How the eye perceives paintings goes beyond the physical length and width of the canvas mounted on stretcher bars. When standing in the middle of a modernist gallery, viewers are creating art and facing the opportunity to extend their perception, just as humans broaden their views of landscapes to include a new dimension that comprises human interventions in natural scenery. This opens up new contexts for understanding and seeing paintings and landscapes.

## The environment

Pablo Picasso  
in his workshop  
in Montmartre,  
Paris, 1908

Allen Carlson proposes replacing the word “landscape” with the word “environment,” whose meaning better reflects the contemporary understanding of the spaces that surround us and includes geographical,

sociological, anthropological, and economic aspects. In a particular environment, we can find connections with history, as every landscape is undeniably a product of natural history or the history associated with human activity. In this sense, landscapes become spaces where human activity has continued for generations, spaces where we can find traces of the presence of former cultures, customs, and social practices. Pure contemplation of beauty is no longer enough, and neither are sensual interactions with esthetic objects. Here, rational knowledge comes to the fore, and so do the interpretation of contexts, the search for meanings, and the understanding of landscapes within the broad framework of culture, which comprises the entire history of human thought. There is no such thing as “one nature”: nature has various versions that depend on the social processes taking place in it.

Nowadays, the environment has become not only a product of human activity, but also one of the subjects of that activity. By this, I mean all the movements aimed at saving and protecting the environment. Their existence also proves that humans do care about nature and no longer treat it as something to merely contemplate. By assuming responsibility for its degradation, we have placed ourselves in the role of its guardians and saviors. Perhaps the ultimate goal is to again assume a role that involves contemplating the esthetic characteristics of nature. For now, however, we humans are aware of our strong impact on the environment.

This shifting understanding of the surrounding world, namely the replacement of the word “landscape” with the word “environment,” coincides with two further stages in the evolution of art – the *stage of time* and the *stage of imagination*. In these periods of artistic activity, images are created over a certain interval of time (and called “happenings”); more importantly, however, they have started to function within the perspective of the context (“conceptualism”). The necessary requisites for a happening and a performance are the passage of time, improvisation, and the fact that artists have no control over the final effect. They can plan their work only in terms of designing events. As they start to happen, they can take on various forms depending on the circumstances and the reactions of the audience. The viewers themselves have a decisive influence on the final product, with artists becoming both creators and creative material. The roles of creators and those of viewers become blurred, and the latter do not necessarily have to be well-versed in art, but can include random passers-by, if the artistic happening takes place in a public place. In turn, all kinds of conceptual activities and records of the thoughts of artists in the form of plans and documents are signs of thinking about works of art in terms of their context. Here, forms are irrelevant, what



FRANCK GELETT BURGESS/PUBLIC DOMAIN



Skaryszew Park,  
Warsaw, 1906

matters is the concept – the conceptual, non-tangible sphere playing itself out in the minds of artists and viewers. Artists deal with references to space, time, and people, and enrich flat images with a living structure, spatial and social systems, and cultural references. Imagery becomes a living fabric that is no longer just tangible, but also non-tangible and functions in the public, historical, and imaginary spheres.

## Spatial images

Let us imagine it is the early twentieth century, and the Polish landscape designer Franciszek Szanior is standing on a meadow in a former village called Kamion, now part of the city of Warsaw, contemplating the floodplains along the Vistula River and designing what would become Poland's most beautiful park landscapes – the Skaryszew Park. Elsewhere, at the same time, Pablo Picasso is working out compositions on canvasses in a style known as analytical cubism. He showcases them in a way that gives space to the paintings, explores the relationships between them, and determines the number of works in the exhibition hall. Years pass, the landscape degrades, or strictly speaking we become aware of the fact that this degradation has been continuing for many generations. Humans shift their attention from the contemplation of land-

scapes to efforts to protect them. In the late 1970s, the Green movement is established in West Germany at the initiative of the former organizers of the 1968 student demonstrations. Established in order to draw attention to green policies at both local and national levels, the movement becomes one of the first inspirations for similar activities across Europe. At the same time, Joseph Beuys locks himself in a New York gallery with a live coyote, thus extending the understanding of paintings or works of art to include the context provided by the symbols of North America, history, and elements of material culture (he had copies of *The Wall Street Journal* brought into the rooms, which the animal promptly urinated on).

Once-flat imagery thus gains a spatial dimension, including in non-tangible space. After all, this turn of events is hardly surprising. Over the centuries, so many things have happened that we cannot look at the surrounding reality solely through the prism of esthetic qualities. It is definitely possible to go on like this, but more complex processes are taking place and will continue to take place in parallel, facilitating a more profound understanding of the world, which translates into artistic expressions of our time. This process is open and subject to constant change. Where will it ultimately lead us? Each of us might try to answer this question in our own manner. ■

### Further reading:

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Ludwiński J., *Epoka Błękitu* [The Blue Epoch], 2003.

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