

SYMBOLIC REFERENTS IN LANDSCAPE PAINTING: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF *I SEE AFRICA*

HARRISON IDAHOSA

Department of Visual and Performing Arts,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Maiduguri, Borno state
harrisonidahosa@yahoo.com

Abstract

The subjective application of meanings drawn from elements of art and other natural objects in landscape painting is the main focus of this paper. The artist captures the connections of symbolic experience of a scene from realistic expressions of dreams, visions, prophesies and imaginations using various methods to achieve a true pictorial statement of life. The paper also centers on an analytical examination of the landscape painting *I See Africa* which is considered to be a symbolic expression of the resurgence of hope for the African continent. The work by Harrison Idahosa is titled, *I See Africa*. The semiotics which are consequent of inherent qualities of elements observed in nature; are combined and organized systematically to effectively express various themes that affect humanity and the world.

Key words: Referents, Symbolism, Semiotics, Visual Artist, Realism, Theme

Definition of Keywords

Referents: The thing or idea that a symbol, word or phrase denotes or refers to.

Symbolism: The investments of meanings or ideas upon a sign or symbols.

Semiotics: The study of signs and symbols of all kinds, what they mean, and how they relate to the things or ideas they refer to.

Visual Artist: A person who creates arts that are perceived by sight.

Realism: Artistic representations of people and the world in an objective manner.

Introduction

The human body, plants, colours and textures all have in exhaustive amounts of symbolic referents which are added to the many other roles they play in our world. Throughout history, artists have explored myriad ways of presenting to their fellow humans these metaphors derived from nature.

Symbolism is implicated in the theory of the work of art as sign, where semiotics or semiology functions. Initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), semiotics is the study of the work of art as an embodiment of signs. This then implies that the work of art is beyond its referents. This is the enriched value of the work of art beyond the mere object. Hence the work of art is a metaphor and capable of diverse interpretation and meaning. Appleton (1977) states, there has never been a period or an art form which has not depended to some extent on the use of symbols. Symbolism, therefore, is as much about evoking understanding as it is about iconography.

The symbolic, emotional expression and the way light reveals visual harmonies of nature is what the artist responds to while painting. Its theme is drawn from human activities and their effect on the earth. Man and nature's response to the divine is also an important consideration. The symbolism derived from the landscape painting *I See Africa* is subjective and it is concerned essentially, with the aspiration of hope for

the African continent. The content of this painting as well as its style; the spontaneity of the artist brush work, his choice of colour all suggest his passion for Africa.

No single painting is meant to satisfy all the enquiry of an artist. Paintings in the genre of symbolic landscapes seek to reveal or point in the direction of truth. The truth as presented by the artist is relative and not absolute. It is however, pertinent to specific conditions. The truth, thus, could be seen as a liberating experience, which is not necessarily found in tangible reality but as a galvanizing support for reality.

Clark (1972) asserts that, symbols are summarized or compact interpretations of the divine. The ideas or statements signified in the Holy Scriptures for example, are often conceived as implicit in symbols. This ability to convey diverse meanings explains the connections between symbolic art expressions, religion and other philosophical imaginations.

Knowing the value of this means awakening thought, arousing interest and revealing information, the artist is then, inspired to derive the meaning (though subjective) from certain elements of nature which are encapsulated within the context of their natural function. The landscape painting titled *I See Africa* acts as a vehicle to transmit the artist's passion and optimism for the African continent and its people. The artist is also driven by the need to create an awareness of the value and existence of symbols that abound everywhere in the outdoors; the grass, the flowers the mountains and so on, may signify truths that may be relevant to our situations.

The rendering of these symbolic forms are not only personal due to what they mean to the artist, but the combination of images in the landscape painting gravitates the viewer or gives him or her reasons to contemplate their deeper meaning. The statement or idea signified in the painting *I See Africa* is implicit in symbols. The symbols that were derived from the landscape painting serve as indications of unveiling mysteries, prophecies and predictions about the great continent of Africa.

Objectives

The objective of this painting are to:

1. effectively translate and modify images derived chiefly from nature into visual metaphor.
2. study the relationships between different elements contained in the painting so as to enhance good composition
3. produce one holistic symbolic landscape painting that will serve as a visual reference point for further study.
4. render good subject, composition, tonal values and colours that evokes a compelling mood.
5. use oil on canvas technique which allows the artist to work with much flexibility and brilliance.
6. state what the artist considers as the truth concerning the continent of Africa.

Conceptual Framework

In northern Europe, the Romantic artist of 18th to early 19th century considered landscape as the ideal vehicle for commenting on spiritual, moral, historical or philosophical issues. Landscape artist assign meanings to the signs and symbols embedded in nature; artist no longer paint mere scenes, but instead translates the unmatched emblems of nature. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) was one of the first artist who depicted the romantic transcendental landscape. His landscape paintings often conveyed a tragic but reverential mood; symbolizing the ephemeral nature of man's stay on earth and transition to the hereafter. "The artist" Friedrich wrote, "should not only paint what he sees before him, but what he sees within him" Landscapes are not common subjects for interpreting societal issues amongst African painters. It is the possibility of using landscape paintings as a strategic tool for creating awareness that enthused the artist. The symbolic landscape painting (*I See Africa*), was executed for the purpose of sensitizing the collective consciousness of its audience towards the dangers of western imperialism as well as the need for Africans to embrace peace and harmony. The landscape painting is imbued with elements that evoke mood and express social and political concerns. However, the quality of the subject depicted provides information as to what degree of involvement the artist has with it. Kreutz (1997), acknowledges that, turning reality into painterly effect one requires not only creativity but insight and empathy.

Landscape paintings

Paintings are pictorial representations of ideas and could be perceived as conversational pieces. They can be about a number of human concerns, for example, politics, religion, astrology, society, economy and so on. They also express emotional and spiritual moods. In landscape painting the natural scenery is the dominant feature, which implies that the painting can be imbued with other objects or elements that are not necessarily predetermined within nature. This natural scenery forms the stage on which the artist redirects the quiet drama played by different elements with symbolic referents.

The artist derives artistic images from elements which are assembled in nature and translating these elements taken from their former state of aesthetic essence to the context of symbolic significance. When the artist observes and studies the forms of nature the symbolic predisposition of his mind responds to his surrounding and triggers deep contemplation so that he is able to project meanings or communicate through his painting. These forms are considered as signs or interpretations of something else and would normally signify more than one idea.

The educating power of symbolic landscapes may be subtle, but very important. The study of the sublime and stupendous truth revealed in nature broadens the imagination, strengthens the mind and elevates the thoughts of the viewer. Also, the rendering of these symbolic forms are not only personal due to what they mean to the artist but the combination of images which directs the viewer's emotion and causes them to ponder on their meaning.

The artist is motivated to transmit passion, optimism and tranquility through the beauty of symbolic landscapes. The artist wants people to realize certain truths and have more understanding about landscapes and how they relate to human conditions.

Symbolism

In the Holy Bible from Genesis to Revelation, God revealed the truth, not only by words but by manifestation of signs and wonders, through dreams and visions that were truly symbolic. The book of Daniel in the bible is a book that can be referred to as the book of prophetic symbols. This is because of the numerous accounts of grand truth which God revealed to Daniel and to the king of the Chaldeans through dreams and visions that were symbolic.

"Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, the secret which the king has demanded the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets and He has made known to king Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the later days..." (The Holy Bible. Daniel 2:27-28) NKJV.

In teaching the truth of God's kingdom, Jesus Christ's Object was the use of parables which are of symbolic references, with their elements often drawn from nature and having great virtue of awakening inquiry and impressing the truth upon man's heart. This position is exemplified in the passage below

"He answered and said to them, because it has been given to you to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance, but he who doesn't have, even that which he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parable, because in seeing they do not see, in hearing they do not hear nor do they understand." (The Holy Bible. Matt.13:11-13) NKJV.

Obviously it is important to understand the significance of symbolic experience perhaps as it is made manifest in landscapes. Reeves (1989), gives an account of a silent gesturing about herself, an experience of a rainforest expedition. All around her on the ground were trees rotting and dying. It was a metaphoric picture of 'life out of death' an illustration of God's gentle message that spoke to her pain. Thus,

"A scene of death, but locked in an embrace with life for reasons no one is certain of seeds from the Olympian trees can't gain a foothold in the soil. But there is one place they can grow the falling, crumbling gains of an earlier forest became nurse logs for the fragile seedlings. When the little trees grow strong enough they send down roots around the log in the soil. From one decaying monarch many trees find nourishment..., and extend their limbs towards heaven." (Parables of the Forest)

In landscape paintings, the symbols are at times vague. Be that as it may, the symbol possesses the ability to signify more than one thing. Gombrich, (1975) supports the polysemic nature of the symbol, stating, "the human intellect cannot exhaust the meanings inherent...each such symbol exhibits what may be called

a plenitude of meanings”. They also present themselves as objects of similitude drawn from life, of which some important lessons can be taught.

Some objects derive their meaning when they are harmoniously associated with other forms or elements. The relationship between these objects or elements makes it easy for one to draw up a theme. For example, colour is a very important element of symbolic paintings. And visual artists assign very significant role to its application. The colours seen when we look at things get us thinking, they evoke emotions and reflect concepts such as memory, hope, passion and other transcendent ideas. Colours do have very deep effects on the minds of humans due to cultural or personal experiences, but they can assume a different connotation when associated with other objects; red may be viewed by some to connote danger, yet a red fruit would symbolize concepts such as passion or pleasure by the same group.

Similarly, symbols vary in the degree of meanings they provide. This is why the sign or symbol is said to be polysemic or polysemous. Pierce (1931) categorizes the semiotic sign into iconic, symbolic and indexical signs. In these frames it is clear that the sign or symbol at times may not convey directly its referent. In essence, symbols are characterized by a subjective application and interpretation but all the same, visual arts provide diverse valid views regarding a symbol, where proper interpretive approach is adopted.

A symbolic landscape painting could fit into the ideal concept not only because the features with which it is composed are chosen from nature, but also because it seeks to create a harmony between man and nature. It is important that we contemplate the significance of the contents of symbolic images. These images are absorbed in the realms of semiology only in the subjective; they do not function as fixed codes.

Literature Review

The outcome of an experience of visual qualities may defer from one individual to another, each grasping meanings that are pertinent to their condition. An artist may introduce images whose content are not necessarily the outcome of personal experience but create themes, statements of man's involvement with his surrounding and with the divine. Monsema (2004) defines these images which suggests mood, act as a metaphor or invite allegorical associations as interpretation of the human condition.

Clark (1972) describing such experience, as the outcome of the symbolizing habit of the mind, rather than an act of providence, which gives an unusual intensity. “For when men look at flowers and trees they do so not only as delightful objects, but as prototypes of the divine”. Clark sees natural objects as a tangible whole that would be a symbol of perfection within the compass of the imagination. To this end, he calls the “discovery” the enchanted garden.

According to Appleton (1977), there is a timeless satisfaction found in landscape, to which the early Greek and Roman poets felt a powerful attraction, though to a landscape whose subjection was symbolized in a garden. He describes landscape as a kind of backcloth to the whole stage of human activity.

On the symbolism of landscape Appleton also records that, the use of images has played a central role in all religions. Religion deals with areas of existence which can only be reached through symbols. At certain periods, for example in the Romantic Movement the importance of symbols in the aesthetics of landscape may have increased, but all forms of art through the ages depend to some extent, on the use of symbols.

Brommer (2002), shares his method for capturing that elusive, essential component of his landscape paintings, which he calls the content, the spirit, emotion or expression of a subject.

Brommer stresses that amongst other components the spirit or the content is the crux of visual communication, “An artist who makes a picture that looks good but expresses nothing is like a writer whose words sound good but have no meaning.” Brommer also states that there is no formula for capturing the spirit of a subject, except, that more emphasis and intensity is placed on the subject, for it is only determined by personal experience. This landscape painting introduces visual images, whose content are not just the outcome of personal experiences, but creates themes, statement of man’s involvement with nature and with the divine.

Review of Related Art Works



Figure I. Artist: Sudjai Chaiyapan (b.1969), Title: The Way of Life from Imagination in the Year (2000). Medium: Oil and acrylic on canvas, Size: 78.5cm x 103.4cm, Source: Our World in the Year 2000

Figure I is titled, *The Way of Life from Imagination in the Year* by Chaiyapan. Chaiyapan’s painting is symbolic expression of the impact human activities have on the world's environment. It shows a putrid landscape of death and decay made up of undulating human forms. Dead trees and bones of animals lie scattered in large piles and poke through still and polluted pools of coloured water.

The artist depicts what he conceives and understands as the truth through symbolic images. The use of muted human body parts painted in various shades of brown and grey amidst the scattering of animal bones only serves to effectively communicate the destructive effect of human activities on the world's environment. The painting also points to the waste of natural resources, thus poisoning everything which subsequently leads to loss of fertility.



Figure II, Artist: Sam Yeates (b.1957), Title: Crawling towards the Millennium, Medium: Acrylic on canvas, Size: 74.7cm x 100.8cm. Source: Our World in the Year 2000

Figure II shows a naked man with wings crouching on a giant turtle, which makes its way across the land. Symbolizing the certainty and perhaps hope that the millennium has to offer. The winged man can also be interpreted to mean angelic guidance. The symbol of good or bad that may be attached to events such as the millennium is represented by the comet shown in the desert across clear blue sky.



Figure III, Artist: Georg Huber (b1961), Title: Watching the moon, Medium: Acrylic on canvas, Size: 60" x 80", Source: International Artist.com

Figure III is an enchanted landscape painting which depicts beauty and awe of life. Its vibrant colours represent enthusiasm as well as the plodding flow of emotions. According to Huber, the painting symbolizes a break from our frequent, restless and sometimes very hectic daily life, providing points of refuge for our eyes and spirits. The painting also depicts the smallness of the human race as it compares to the vastness of nature.

Methodology

Data Collection

The prominent source of information used for this work is nature. Additional data was sourced from text books, journals, the internet and other relevant publications.

Painting Procedure



Plate I. Step I: after serious thought and working out the composition, each major element is viewed as a mass. The first layer of colours are applied in a wash of bluish-grey, while introducing form and perspective.



Plate II. Step 2: Colours are added to each mass establishing tonal values

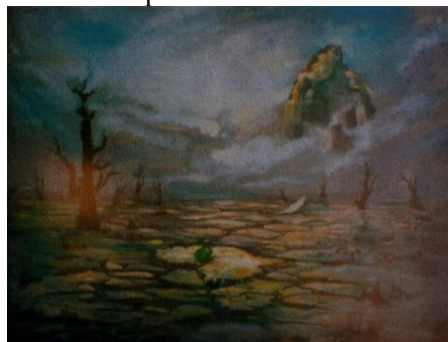


Plate III. Step 3: A gradual building up continues and the painting begins to develop, the elements begin to relate (the distant forms are resolved and the distinct forms evolve).



Plate IV. Step 4: The refining part of the painting is the most time-consuming. Emphasis is placed on application technique and colour adjustments to create a dramatic over all change in the painting



Plate V. Step 5: Detailing and developing the center of interest. The details are refined.

Material

Paints: oil colours

Support: canvas (sized from the factory). Tools: bristle brushes (flats and rounds), painting and palette knives.

Size

72" x 56" (180cm x 140 cm)

Sketches

An easy way to begin the imaging process was to sketch individual elements of the proposed landscape most of which were fond memories of visual images.

Combing Elements. This element is sieved and the remaining elements combined to produce a picture.

Photographs

Photographs of different earth surfaces and earthen objects were taken to study their formation and how they react to light. These studies enabled the researcher to effectively depict visually, the mountains within the landscape.

Discussion of Compositional Elements

The compositional geometry was worked at one third sky to two third land and mountain range. The largest tree is at the left, while the mountain is positioned at the top right to balance the mass (tree) on the left.

A progression of thoughts led to the derivation and arrangement of images. The sketches made helped to organize the artist's visual thoughts. It is these visual notes (sketches) that helped the researcher to make useful notations of the surroundings, looking all the time for lighting, balance, atmosphere and all the elements that add up to a good composition.

The symbols in landscape paintings may be interpreted with the use of colours as they play a very important role in every painting. Because colour is the language with which the emotions and moods of the artist are transmitted. In determining the outlook of the composition, the viewpoint was taken into

consideration. The viewer is compelled to enjoy the space between the foreground and the horizon and then, discover the complexity of the sky.

Every painting needs to have one area that is the most important, usually interesting aspect in the painting. It is called the focal point. If incorrectly placed, it may push the viewer's eye out of the painting or may bore the viewer. It is important therefore, to position the focal point in a way that will draw the viewer's eye into the painting.

Svagrik (2004) states that one method of finding a good position for the focal point is to imagine a line drawn diagonally from one corner of the surface to the other. Then imagine another line coming from one of the remaining corners so that it meets the first diagonal line at a 90-degree angle. Anywhere along the intersection of these two lines is the focal point.

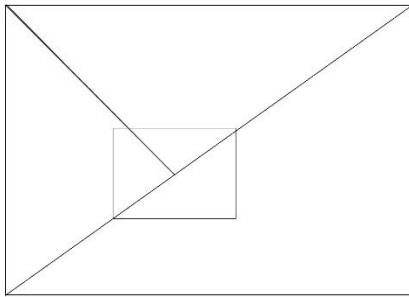


Figure IV, Svagrik's method of placing focal points. 2004: International Artist magazine.

The focal point is accentuated by the introduction of intriguing images or by having the sharpest edge and definition.

Symbolic Interpretation

Plate VI is a symbolic landscape painting which does not represent a place that is known, but it is an expression of a land beyond Africa perhaps a symbol of spiritual earth. The composition depicts the continent of Africa carved out of a cracking earth with growing plant, which speaks of the emergence of a new life pattern. The drop of water on the leaf of the plant signifies the condition of hope and refreshment that comes from heaven. The mountain on the right denotes spiritual height, (the holy place of the Lord—Zion). A place of refuge and a place where truth is revealed from God to man. This is further explained by the verse found the Holy bible; in Isaiah 2:2:

“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it.” (The Holy Bible, Isaiah 2:1). NKJV



Plate VI. Detail showing the drop of water on the leaf of a growing plant

The influence of western imperialism is symbolized by the gigantic tree whose roots are breaking and its branches leafless. In plate VII the large expanse of cracked land symbolizes the quaking earth, which longs for external deliverance, the depth in between the cracks signify fear, threat and danger of being trapped in ignorance. The opening vista of light signifies the bright prospects which Africa aspires to. The symbolism of time and age may be attached to bones and fossils on the fore ground.

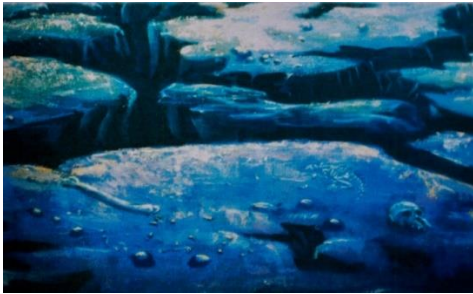


Plate VII. Detail showing bones and fossils on the fore ground

Africa can only reach its dream and aspirations in an atmosphere of peace. In plate VIII the small white feather at the middle speaks of covering and flights (When a bird loses its feathers it loses its covering and will not be able to fly to great heights). The feather also denotes calm and the absence of harm because of its light and soft nature.



Plate VIII. Detail showing the small white Feather at the center of the landscape, in between the small trees

The smaller trees denote the presence of distractions and negative influences that are almost hidden in the dark, but are revealed by the reflections of light. One characteristic of truth which is represented by the light is that it exposes evil.

The artist devolved a very essential role to the use of colours that featured in this landscape painting. Different shades of blue dominate the scenery of the landscape painting (*I see Africa*), a very introspective colour that suggests tranquility and invites the viewer to somber reflections on the meaning of this symbolic painting. The green of the plant speaks of freshness and growth. We must cultivate a new

paradigm of tolerance, love and respect for the sanctity of human life if we must attain to the heights of glory. The warm hues of yellow and orange in parts of the sky and mountain evoke a sense of optimism as well as the need for urgent responses. This painting provides the opportunity of using symbols or visual metaphors to make statements focusing on the theme of springing up of new life.

Thematic Discussion/ Analysis

The painting titled *I See Africa* is described as an attempt to deliver a message to the African continent. The continent referred to as the great continent; the cradle of civilization, soon became the victim of western imperialism, disease, war and poverty. The landscape painting is centered on the resurgence of Africa, its people and land through a systematic process of reconstruction and resolution.

The theme continues to buttress the fact that Africa as a continent appears to be craving for its destiny; a destiny that can only be attained when it's people (Africans) uphold and practice godly (not religious) principles and values such as tolerance, love, perseverance, respect for one another, selflessness, justice and righteousness. The painting suggests symbolically, to Africa to shun corruption and follow her conscience. It emphasizes the need for Africans to speak the language of peace, to pursue godliness, justice and aim for physical, physiological, social and economic development instead of warring against each other. It also speaks of the need to resolve existing differences of within, an optimistic atmosphere, an aspiration of greatness the painting expresses symbolically, the golden aspirations of Africa.

Conclusion

The painting *I See Africa* was created to make a statement about Africa and to send a message to Africans all over the world, as a visual metaphor. The objective was to create a landscape painting with symbolic meanings introduced to invite questions and to allow the viewer to ponder on their meanings. Relevant deductions and inferences were made from available literature and images through personal and deep contemplation, imagination, observation and questions asked. A series of issues were raised in the process of painting.

The compositional ideas were central to the artist's thought process. Data was collected through a series of sketches which were used to create the final image. The interpretation of some of these images were personally derived, while the others are universally recognizable. This painting is to be seen as a symbol of prospect, signifying the potential greatness of Africa and the rising of our mother-land.

Appleton (1977) asserts that, scientist will consider the approach made through art as imprecise on the other hand the artist will regard the scientific approach as merely superficial examination of nature and natural processes for the aesthetic considerations necessary to give them deeper meaning have been excluded.

The study of symbolism derived in landscape painting should serve as a bridge between the arts and sciences; it is an enquiry into nature, the relationship of man to his place of habitat and to the divine. The

painting, is one way through which the artist's voice is heard and his heart seen. The work acts as a vehicle for the expression of the artist's ideals and what he considers to be the truth.

References

- Gombrich, E.H (1965): *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, Phaidon Press Ltd.
- Encyclopedia of World Art: Vol. ix (1972): McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc. New York
- Gombrich, E.H (1975): *Symbolic Images*, Phaidon Press Ltd, Oxford
- Spencer, H. (1975): *The Image Maker*, New York, Charles Scriber's Sons.
- Appleton, J. (1977): *The Experience of Landscape*, New York, John Wiley Sons Ltd,
- Gombrich, E. H. (1982): *Image and the Eye*, Oxford, Phaidon Press Ltd.
- Reeve, P. (1989): *Parables of the Forest*, Portland, Multnomah Press.
- Winsor and Newton, (2000): *Our World in the Year 2000*, U.K., Sheeran Lock, Publication.
- International Artist (2002): *The Magazine for Artist by Artist from Around the World*. San Diego.
- International Artist (2004): *The Magazine for artist by artist from around the world* (23rd -39th Edition), San Diego.
- Kleiner, F. S. & Mamiya, C. J. (2005): *Gardner's Art through the Ages* (Twelfth Edition) Volume II, Belmont, Wordsworth/ Thompson Learning.
- International Artist (2009): *The Magazine for artist by artist from around the world* Scottsdale.
- International Artist (2012): *The Magazine for Artist by Artist from around the World*. (84th and 87th Edition), Scottsdale.
- The New King James Version (2007): John Maxwell Leadership Bible. Tennessee, Thomas Nelson, Inc.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1972): *Symbolic-Images-Studies-in-the-art-of-the-Renaissance*. London, Phaidon. Retrieved from, www.scribd.com/doc/187941375/
- <http://www.southwestart.com/featured/fraser-apr2013>
- <http://artiberty.blogspot.com/2015/03/semiotics-as-method-of-visual.html>
- <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>
- <http://www.signosemio.com/elements-of-semiotics.asp>