

Sample 25 Mark Nature in Art & Architecture Essay

(b) 'An artist needs to experience nature at first hand in order to represent it successfully.'
How far do you agree with this statement? To support your answer you must refer to:

- named works of art from pre-1850 and post-1850
- your critical text(s). (25)

Throughout the history of art, the natural world has always been an important subject and source of inspiration for artists. One way that artists study the natural world is to experience nature at first hand. However, there are other ways that artists can come to know the world around them. Technical innovations such as the camera obscura and photography have allowed for a more mediated experience of the natural world, which can arguably help artists represent nature more 'successfully'. Abstract and conceptual art have challenged the very possibility of artistic representation, questioning whether it is even possible to represent nature 'successfully'.

According to Philip Steadman, a number of Dutch Gold Age painters used the camera obscura as an aid to painting. The Dutch painter Carel Fabritius was fascinated by the trompe-l'œil and illusionistic perspective. According to Steadman, the pronounced distortions of the cobbled street and the foreshortened viola da gamba in the foreground in his *View of Delft* (1652) have led critics to question how it was painted and originally displayed. Quentin Williams has argued that Fabritius used a camera obscura with a curved screen, and that the painting was mounted on a curved frame inside a perspective box or peepshow.

Furthermore, art historians have also argued that Johannes Vermeer's paintings share a number of key characteristics with photography. Peter Kemp has argued that some of his paintings feature effects of light visible only through a lens: optical phenomena which are not seen with the naked eye. Philip Steadman believes that the specular highlights dancing on the water in the mid-ground of Vermeer's topographical *View of Delft* (1661) may be the result of the camera obscura that Vermeer used to record the scene. Yet many consider this painting to an accurate, naturalistic and wholly 'successful' view of the city of Delft in the seventeenth century. It can therefore be argued that even though the artist may have observed the scene through the mediated lens of the camera obscura, it is still a 'successful' representation of nature.

According to Walter Benjamin's *A Short History of Photography* (1931), Maurice Utrillo painted his topographical views of Paris not from life, but from picture postcards. Utrillo's *Street with Lamppost* (1920) was almost certainly painted after a black and white photographic print of the hunting lodge of Henri IV in Montmartre. The view in the oil painting is identical to that in the postcard. However, Utrillo has not copied the image verbatim. He has added an additional chimney to the lodge and another to the low building in the background. He has also added three figures walking down the street that are not present in the postcard image. In addition, the postcard print is in black and white, yet Utrillo's painting is naturalistic in colour.

For some, Utrillo's use of picture postcards as visual references called into question the role of the artist, and the notion of originality in the creative process. He was criticised for working from postcards, instead of experiencing nature at first hand. In 1939, a shipment of Utrillo's paintings was on route to a gallery in New York when it was detained by US customs officials. They had decided that the paintings should be classified as 'manufactured items' rather than fine art, because they were painted from postcards. They refused to release the shipment until the gallery owners paid the additional tax duty. Undeterred, Utrillo was convinced that he did not need to experience nature at first hand in order to represent it successfully in his paintings.

In contrast, the Impressionist were adamant that artists should paint *en plein air*, in order to capture the appearance of the light as it flickered and faded while they worked. They took Charles Baudelaire's call for artists to paint 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent...the eternal and the immutable' in the modern world around them very literally. They were committed to studying the appearance of quickly shifting light on the surface of forms and the representation changing atmospheric conditions in the natural world.

A series of innovations allowed them to travel the countryside around Paris, and paint what they saw at first hand. The building of the railways meant that they could escape the city in order to immerse themselves in a variety of landscapes: towns, fields, rivers and the Normandy coast. Furthermore, the recently invented portable easel and paint tube allowed artists to transport their equipment with them to the countryside, where previously they had been confined to the studio, working from memory and sketches.

The benefits of painting *en plein air* can be seen in Claude Monet's *The Cliff, Étretat, Sunset* (1883) in which the artist has used a succession of staccato brushstroke to capture the rapidly shifting light of the sunset over the Normandy coast. His first-hand experience of the scene is particularly evident in the colours used in the painting. Rather than simply painting the sea blue, as we imagine it to be, Monet has also painted it green, red, brown, orange and yellow. These

colours reflect the light of the setting sun and form shadows rippling out from the Falaise d'Aval and Aiguille. This kind of detail might be missed if the artist was painting from memory or a photograph.

Paul Cézanne and the Cubist artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque also painted landscape from first-hand experience. However, in their increasingly abstract works, it is often difficult to distinguish the purported landscape that the title suggests. For example, in paintings such as Braque's *Houses at L'Estaque* (1908) or *The Castle at La Roche-Guyon* (1909), the artists deny the viewer the illusion of pictorial depth, and construct the landscape out of a series of titling planes and geometric shapes. Only the title gives any indication that this is a landscape; it is arguably neither accurate or 'successful', and yet Braque was working from first-hand experience of the scene.

The title of Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973) is also significant, as the title and accompanying wall text are the only evidence the viewer has that the work is a nature study. Craig-Martin's installation is part of a movement that Lucy Lippard has defined as 'so-called conceptual or information or idea art'. Developing the logic of Marcel Duchamp's ready-made sculptures, Craig-Martin engages his viewer in a playful semiotic subversion that enacts a post-structuralist shift in the relationship between signifier and signified. We can assume that Craig-Martin had seen an oak tree before, witnessed them at first hand, and yet this glass of water on a shelf looks nothing like an oak tree. In order for this work to function 'successfully', Craig-Martin requires his viewer's to willingly suspend their disbelief and engage with his conceptual play on the traditional nature study.

Craig-Martin has written that: 'belief underlies our whole experience of art', and his work highlights the artifice inherent in all artistic representations, regardless of how naturalistic or 'real' they may appear. *An Oak Tree* challenges the belief that art can ever represent nature 'successfully', and raises the even more complex question of whether it should. Now that advances in technology have relieved artists of their duty to record and accurately represent nature, first-hand experience may no longer be necessary. Instead, artists are free to engage more critically with the world around them.