

An artist needs to experience nature at first hand in order to represent it successfully SAMPLE ESSAY

'An artist needs to experience nature at first hand in order to represent it successfully.' How far do you agree?

Plan

- Introduction: decode the question
- Landscapes:
 - personal experience: Van Gogh Wheatfield with crows, 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
 - constructed: Claude Hagar and the Angel, 1646, National Gallery
 - or Agnes Denes Wheatfield – A Confrontation, Manhattan
- Animals:
 - for scientific record Mansur's Zebra 1621, V&A,
 - constructed: Durer's Rhinoceros, 1515, British Museum
- Conclusion: final judgement

The broad term of nature includes both landscapes and flora and fauna. None of these subjects played a major role in the traditional mainstream of European art before the 17th century and so interest has often been associated with scientific development and an increasing awareness of place and a sense of belonging. The element of 'success', however is much more subjective and is open to interpretation.

The Dutch, Post Impressionist painter, Vincent Van Gogh painted 'Wheatfield with crows' in 1890 as one of his final works. At the time, he was living in Auvers and had spent many hours in these fields of corn, as evidenced in his letters to his brother, Theo. His aim was to capture "the vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies." This suggests that although his experience of the landscape was both real and at first hand, his use of it was filtered through his own subjective experience. The composition of a double square is panoramic and is combined with an unusually high horizon line which has the effect of exaggerating the effort required to 'conquer' this landscape. The image is cropped suggesting that the wheat extends further. Colour is used descriptively with blue sky and yellow corn, but the saturated hues selected by Van Gogh exaggerate the emotional experience and suggestion of an imminent storm (both literal and psychological). Complementary tones heighten this discomfort with red paths/green vegetation in addition to the blue/yellow combination. Impasto brushwork and directional strokes add to the idea of distance (longer in the foreground and increasingly choppy and dark in the background) but more importantly, emphasise the practice of mark making rather than the reality of nature. This might also be suggested by the conflicting directions of the wheat blown to the right while the clouds move to the left. The crows are simply silhouetted as angular V shapes again suggesting that Van Gogh's main priority is not of 'first hand' accuracy but of a "symbolic" purpose (Kenneth Clarke). As Van Gogh is one of the most popular and familiar

artists in the world today, it is reasonable to suggest that this is a successful work, despite his lack of recognition in his own life time.

On the other hand, the French painter, Claude Lorrain, addressed the aesthetics of perfect beauty in his highly constructed landscapes. He came up with a formula which he repeats across many works: he uses a narrative title to justify his landscape focus and a balanced composition with a large motif on one side and a smaller element on the other. In 'Hagar and the Angel' (1646), the tree is non-specific in type but it acts as a "coulis" to direct the viewer's eye to the central light source on the horizon. According to the old testament, this story took place in ancient Palestine but here appears to be taking place in contemporary Italy. The diffused light highlights the planes of space and the winding path through the lake, under the bridge, along the river and into the distant hills. This idealised approach remained dominant throughout the subsequent centuries suggesting that it was extremely 'successful'. Indeed, both Turner and Constable used this work in their hugely popular works. Constable declared Claude "the most perfect landscape painter the world has ever seen."

Durer seems to have been motivated by the possibility of an exotic animal in his woodcut of a rhinoceros (1515). He was reputed to have read about an Indian rhinoceros that had been sent by Manuel I from Lisbon in the early 16th century as a gift for Pope Leo X. The animal died en-route as the ship sank in the Mediterranean, possibly adding to the appeal. The image is inaccurate in a number of specific points: it seems to be wearing an armour-plated skin and has an additional twisted horn at the top of its spine. The importance of the rhinoceros had been commented on by Pliny who said that they were "so well armed that elephants could do no harm". Durer's choice to produce a woodcut rather than a painting meant that the image could be easily circulated adding to the success of the image and recognition of exotic collections at the time. It is thought that 15,000 copies were made in 1516. Despite later, more accurate depictions of the animal, it is this 'fantastical' image which has remained more popular as a signifier for the strength of the beast.

On the other hand, Ustad Mansur was clearly fascinated by the first-hand accuracy of his record of a zebra for Emperor Jahangir. The zebra arrived from Ethiopia in 1621, into the port of Goa and after Mansur had painted the animal, it was sent on to Shah Abbas of Persia in mutual celebration of their increasing knowledge and collections. Mansur had painted fantastical animals earlier in his career, influenced by Miskin to illustrate the 'Anwar Sohayli', but for this commissioned work, it seems that accuracy and first-hand experience was important to mark both the increasing power of the Emperor and the zenith of Mughal art, culture and empire. Furthermore, his success was also recognised as the Emperor himself wrote on the right-hand side of the image and gave Mansur the title 'Wonder of the Age'.

In conclusion then, the importance of first-hand experience seems to depend on the intended use and patronage of the work, while 'success' is a more transient idea which can either be measured by reputation at the time, or by the awareness in today's era. Clearly, the further away we get from the actual time of the work, the exact details of place will be less relevant but for flora and fauna much more will be known about the exact details.