

## A REVIEW OF REFLECTED LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*This paper examines selected reflected landscape paintings within the context of Nigerian contemporary art practice, with emphasis on the aesthetic, symbolic, and conceptual significance of water reflections in landscape representation. The study traces the historical development of landscape painting from the Western tradition to its emergence in modern Nigerian art, highlighting the influence of colonial academic realism on Nigerian painters. Through a qualitative visual and formal analysis of selected artworks by Nigerian artists, the paper investigates the styles, techniques, compositions, and philosophical undertones embedded in reflected landscape imagery. Particular attention is given to the use of colour, light, atmosphere, and reflective water surfaces as visual devices for expressing tranquillity, uncertainty, environmental consciousness, and socio-political metaphors. The study reveals that although landscape painting has received some scholarly attention in Nigeria, reflected landscape painting remains insufficiently documented and critically understudied within Nigerian art history. The paper concludes that reflected flora and water reflections constitute important visual resources that expand the expressive possibilities of contemporary Nigerian painting. It therefore recommends further artistic and scholarly engagement with reflected landscape imagery as a significant area of visual and cultural exploration in Nigerian art practice.*

**Keywords:** Landscape Painting, Reflected flora, and Nigerian Perspective.

### Introduction

The art of painting landscapes has been a popular subject for artists throughout history. Often, traditional landscape painting depicts the natural world. The practice of landscape painting in Nigeria in the early 19th century was influenced by the 'cheap' representation of British landscape art as submitted by Uche Okeke in Gushem (1990). According to Gushem (1990), landscape is made up of two design elements: form and colour, and a most characteristic factor, atmosphere (consisting of light, shadow, sky, and aerial perspective). Gushem further submits that elements of landscape from the very early times are said to be incidental background accessories of historical, mythological, and other types of paintings.

On the other side of the coin, Ejiboye & Olusegun (2015) submit that contemporary landscape painting, a visual art genre, dates back to the pre-independent era in Nigeria. The story of landscape painting in Nigeria is encapsulated in the history of modern Nigerian art, which traces back to European influence on Nigerian visual expression. Britain played a major role in the birth of landscape painting in Nigeria. This is because landscape painting is one of the components of easel painting, which was never a tradition in Nigeria until the colonial experience.

The art of painting landscapes in modern Nigerian art space is influenced by the coming of Western academic practice. This is supported by Ejiboye & Olusegun (2015), who state that Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) was the first landscape painter recorded in the history of modern Nigerian art, marking the starting point of landscape painting in Nigeria in the early 1900s. Other painters such as Akinola Lasekan, Ben Enwonwu, Adeyemi Adenuga, Albert Odunsi, E. Okaybulu, and D. Ebanda can be considered precursors of landscape painting in modern Nigerian art. However, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of unrecorded landscape painters due to inadequate art-historical records. Their works show that landscape painting in Nigeria had reached a high standard before Nigeria's independence, as evidenced by reproductions of landscapes by these precursors.

One possible landscape element that has gained attention is the transformation of reflected flora landscapes in water for painting. The subgenres of landscape include seascape, cityscape, river landscape, vegetation landscape, desert landscape, ocean landscape, skyscape, moonscape, etc. Most reflected landscape paintings depict natural scenes and their reflections. An example is the paintings of Seby (2025), where the reflections in the water mirror the greenery and sky, creating visual balance and harmony. The painting follows a realist style, with a detailed representation of nature. The artist uses careful brushstrokes to render a faithful depiction of the trees, sky, and water reflections, creating a lifelike scene. The painting portrays a tranquil natural landscape, emphasising the beauty and serenity of nature along a peaceful riverbank, with reflections in the water enhancing the calm atmosphere.

### **Aim of this Paper**

This paper aims to review and document reflected landscape paintings of selected Nigerian painters, with a view to establishing their styles, techniques, and philosophy. Landscape painting in Nigeria has not received enough academic attention. Thus, this paper provides a short historical view of landscape painting in Nigeria. Another silent element of landscape painting is the reflected landscape, which artists often capture. These reflected landscapes create a captivating, artistic composition. The mirrored image on the water can create a sense of tranquillity and evoke a feeling of being immersed in nature. In addition to its aesthetic appeal, a reflected flora landscape on water can also have ecological significance. It can indicate the health and abundance of plant life in the area and provide habitat for aquatic organisms. Overall, a reflected flora landscape in water is a beautiful and natural phenomenon that showcases the interconnectedness of land and water ecosystems. It offers a unique perspective and enhances the visual appeal of the surrounding environment.

The reflection serves as a metaphor for the subjectivity of our experience, which is influenced by our cultural, social, and personal backgrounds and may differ significantly. The mirrored image in the water represents how our minds reflect and interpret the external world, suggesting that our perception of reality is subjective rather than objective. The aesthetic appeal of the reflection evokes admiration and wonder, eliciting positive emotions such as joy and happiness. Kant (1724-1804), in his *Critique of Judgement*, discusses the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful in relation to the aesthetics of reflected landscapes. He argues that the sublime is experienced when encountering natural landscapes that are vast, powerful, and overwhelming. He further opines that “reflecting judgement enables us to discover empirical laws of nature by leading us to regard nature as if it were the product of intelligent design”.

In doing so, the paper analyses three landscape paintings with an affinity for reflections on water to ascertain their styles, techniques, philosophies, ideologies, and impact on visual art practice not only in Nigeria but also across the globe.

## Literature Review

This section of the paper provides an overview of visual expression in landscape painting, tracing its evolution from the Renaissance to the present day. Artists have been painting the landscape since ancient times. The Greeks and Romans created wall paintings of landscapes and gardenscapes (Serino, 2019). Adiwu (2015) opines that the importance of landscape painting in art practice was relegated, initially, to becoming a mere background for a thematic subject or a setting for a portrait. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the tradition of representing pure landscapes was denied, and the landscape was seen only as a stage for religious scenes and figures. This tradition continued until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when artists began to view the landscape as a theme in their own right. The artistic change seems to have corresponded to a growing interest in the natural world caused by the Renaissance.

During the Renaissance in the West, art remained centred on narratives of biblical, mythological and historical themes as previously noted by Gushem (1990). Consequently, few examples celebrating scenery alone can be found from this period. However, Witek (2021) adds that,

*It is important to note that often these stories were told against a natural scenery background. Furthermore, mathematical advancements in painting technique made during the Renaissance era had a profound effect on landscape painting. It led to a deeper understanding of perspective and proportion, revolutionising the way scenery was depicted. In Joachim Patinir's (1520-1524) landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx, an appreciation of nature fostered by the artist's travels is displayed. However, the principal subject remains the classical mythical tradition of Charon and the underworld.*

The painting shown in Fig. 1, titled “Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx”, emphasises the classical mythical tradition of Charon and the underworld, whereby the landscape scene stands as a background for storytelling. Witek (2021) further submits thus:



Fig. 1, Joachim Patinir, Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx, Oil on Canvas, 64cm x 103cm, 1520-1524. Museo del Prado, Madrid <https://museothyssen.org>

*In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Peiro Henri de Valenciennes changed the direction of landscape painting in France. Like Poussin, he saw landscape painting as worthy of the condition of history painting and worked to convince the Academy and its contemporaries. In 1800, Henri published a pioneering book on landscape painting; elements practice the perspective of landscape painting. The book emphasised the aesthetic ideal of the historical landscape, which should be based on the study of real nature. The success of the Academy book pushed to create a prize for the historical landscape in 1817.*

Witek asserted that Romantic art encompasses three main categories of landscape paintings: picturesque, which showcases the beauty and wildness of nature; pastoral, which celebrates humanity's dominion over the natural world; and sublime, which aims to display the incredible, divine power of nature for a distinct purpose. Sublime Romantic landscape art primarily focuses on terrifying the viewer with the sheer power of the natural world, implying that nature itself embodies the wrath of God.

### Analysis of Selected Works

This section analyses four landscape paintings by Nigerian artists. These contemporary artworks demonstrate the artists' exploration of various styles, techniques and materials. The analysis is presented in the context of the styles, techniques and philosophies to aid the reader's comprehension.

The painting entitled "Red Light" in Fig. 2 by Abiodun depicts an urban area with storeyed buildings on both sides of the street. The reflective reddish lights of receding cars on the road suggest the aftermath of rainfall. The artist uses a grey palette to execute this painting. He seems to show elements of human activities in his painting. The reflection of light on the muddy water surface, gathered in wet patches across the street, may suggest slippery conditions. The distribution of light all over the painting is rhythmically executed. This painting, with subtle, subdued shades of colour, depicts a deserted street. This work differs significantly from the focus of this research, whereas the reflections in this work are an offshoot of the painting's subject matter. This study concentrates on the reflected images.



Fig.2 Abiodun Olaku, "Right Light", 1990, Oil on canvas, 70cm x 90cm, [crouchingrose/abiodun-olaku](https://www.crouchingrose.com/abiodun-olaku)



Fig.3, Abiodun Olaku, Grey Tunes, 2005  
Oil on Canvas, 95 cm x 110cm  
[www.pinterest.com/www.abiodunolaku.com](https://www.pinterest.com/www.abiodunolaku.com)

In Fig. 3, the artist illusionistically carries the viewer into the water, as if the water flows along the walls of the buildings. This painting depicts uncertainty and a lack of safety. There is a sign of displacement of lives and properties of the inhabitants. This painting envisages ruins and

death. The scenery seems to be deserted. The grey tones of colour, as the title suggests, are the aftermath of a heavy downpour.



Fig. 4 Smith Olaoluwa, Dream Sailboat, 2024, Acrylic on Canvas, 58.4cm x 68.6cm, [www.artmajeur.com/olaoluwa-smith/en/artworks/18224584/dream-sailboats](http://www.artmajeur.com/olaoluwa-smith/en/artworks/18224584/dream-sailboats).



Fig.5 “Dryness in the midst of Plenty” Onoja Jacob, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 60cm x 90cm. [www.researchgate.net/publication/353015397](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/353015397)

The painting in Fig. 4, entitled “Dream Sailboat” by Olaoluwa, is a plastic painting of a seascape executed with a primary-colour palette, depicting an array of boats at varying distances across the seascape. Cyan blue is used as the background of the picture plane. Prussian blue is laid across the line of the horizon, while red is used to represent the boat at the right of the middle ground. The mainsails of the two boats in the middle of the composition are portrayed in cadmium yellow. Also, the hulls of the four boats on the left are executed in Prussian blue. The boats in the background and the navy blue boats are soaring up on a white mainsail. The reflections of the boats on the water surface are segmented, representing the rippling water. The plastic execution signifies calmness on the sea. Contextually, the painting appears to signify safety, hope, and peace, seeing that the painting style is a flat, smooth one.

The painting in Fig. 5, titled Dryness in the Midst of Plenty, is executed using oil on canvas. Onoja depicts a realistic painting of a riverine area, showing water flow and trees along the riverbank. The flow of the water evokes calmness and a refreshing environment, creating a peaceful atmosphere for the viewer, and the flowing water captures the colourful reflection of the sky. The prominent tree in the composition is the dry, leafless one among the fresh, green ones, leaning down toward the water. As the title of the painting suggests, the dryness in the midst of plenty is ironic: a dry tree stands close to a river, while the other trees look green and fresh. This could give room for several interpretations. Whereas the sky is colourfully greyish, the celebration of white patches on the water could represent bright daylight. This painting seems to be metaphorical and spiritual. How could a tree by the sea die and not flourish? The dried tree could represent the masses in a country of plenty; the rich politicians and those in power are oppressing the least privileged in society. The country’s bountiful resources are looted and held by individuals in the polity and/or in power. They are seeing but cannot be beneficiaries. In another way, the

dried trees could depict citizens where we have lots of resources. Still, we allow the imperialists to come and syphon off our natural resources; hence we remain impoverished.

### **Findings:**

The study established that landscape painting occupies an important position within the development of modern and contemporary Nigerian art, particularly through the influence of Western academic realism and easel painting traditions. The analysis further reveals that reflected landscape painting, especially reflections of flora and environmental scenery on water surfaces, has received limited scholarly attention in Nigerian art discourse despite its aesthetic and conceptual significance.

The selected paintings demonstrate that reflections in landscape compositions are not merely decorative elements but function as expressive visual devices capable of communicating psychological, symbolic, environmental, and socio-political meanings. The study also found that Nigerian artists employ diverse stylistic approaches, including realism and expressive naturalism, in representing reflective water surfaces and atmospheric effects.

Furthermore, the research reveals a scarcity of documented literature and critical studies specifically dedicated to reflected landscape painting, both within Nigerian and broader African art scholarship. Most available studies discuss landscape painting generally without isolating reflection as a distinct visual and conceptual component. The paper, therefore, identifies reflected flora landscapes as an underexplored source of artistic inspiration and a fertile area for future studio experimentation, documentation, and scholarly inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

Landscape painting continues to evolve within Nigerian contemporary art practice, reflecting both environmental realities and the creative aspirations of artists who engage with nature as a source of visual expression. This study has shown that reflected landscape painting possesses significant aesthetic, symbolic, and conceptual potential, particularly through the depiction of water reflections, atmospheric conditions, and mirrored environmental forms. The analysed works demonstrate how reflections can extend beyond naturalistic representation to communicate emotional states, environmental consciousness, social commentary, and philosophical ideas about perception and reality.

The study further establishes that reflected landscape painting remains inadequately documented in Nigerian art-historical literature despite its growing presence in contemporary painting practice. While Western landscape traditions have been extensively studied, little attention has been given to reflected landscape imagery as a distinct thematic and visual category in Nigerian art. This gap presents opportunities for further research, documentation, and studio-based experimentation.

Nigeria's rich ecological environments, including riverine areas, wetlands, savannahs, and coastal landscapes, provide abundant visual resources that inspire innovative artistic interpretations. The paper, therefore, concludes that reflected flora, landscapes, and water reflections should be explored more extensively by artists and researchers as important visual elements that can enrich contemporary Nigerian painting and meaningfully contribute to the expansion of landscape discourse in African art scholarship.

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