

Foreword

Before I begin, I would like to say a huge thank you on behalf of me and Sophie for the Trust's generosity in letting us go to London for our art trip. We enjoyed it immensely, and learnt a lot. It has greatly aided me in my art historical writing and the access I had to such great art made a huge difference to how I perceive art both in my writing and purely observation. Thanks to you, I have made a confident start into A Level History of Art and I am looking forward to revisiting the galleries me and Sophie went to on our trip with my new class.

So, to all the trustees at Henry Morris, thank you greatly.

James Rayner

Henry Morris Report - James Rayner

My main motivation behind visiting the V&A and National Gallery was to start experiencing the art that I was writing about first-hand in my essays on Medium. Before I went on the trip, I had written two long-form essays on Caravaggio and Botticelli but had seen none of either painter's art in-person. This was especially ironic for Caravaggio, who had long been my favourite artist before I actually saw his work in person with Sophie.

There is something rather wondrous about seeing a piece of art you know but have never seen in the flesh before. I will never forget that feeling of seeing my first Caravaggio, "The Supper at Emmaus", in the National Gallery. It was breathtaking, there was something rather incredible about seeing the brushstrokes of the master on the canvas. It felt like I was seeing the painting just as Caravaggio himself would have seen it. You always feel a certain sense of the artist's presence when you look at their work in person; I remember joking to Sophie, when I got really close to the painting, that this was probably where Caravaggio had *his* head some 400 years ago in Rome when he undertook the work. That is something you do not get in reproductions; it simply does not exist on a computer screen, it exists only in the museum.

"The Supper at Emmaus" is one of the paintings I specifically went on the trip to see. I wanted to see Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne" because I had written about it before I went with Sophie to the gallery. I wanted to see the cast of Michelangelo's famous "David" in the V&A because I had watched a video essay on it. I wanted to see Vincent's "Sunflowers" because I had talked about them with a friend. There were many works I wanted to see because I had some preconceived knowledge about them and wished to see that knowledge contextualised within the work itself. When I looked at Jan Van Eyck's "Arnolfini Portrait", I found myself looking for all the intricate details of symbology that I had learnt about in books that I had read and videos I had watched. And, when I did see the portrait in person, all that I learnt seemed to make more sense when I looked at the real thing.

But, as amazing as this all was, one of the most exciting things about going to the galleries were all the *new* paintings I discovered. One of the most memorable of these for me and Sophie was Paul Delaroche's "The Execution of Lady Jane Grey". I had originally entered

the room it was in facing away from the painting, drawn instead to some small landscapes on the wall opposite. Sophie tapped me on the shoulder and told me to turn around, and there it was. It stunned me, what drama, what storytelling! We both went up to it and stared at it for a few minutes, talking about how much we loved it. Now, Delaroche is an artist I always look for when I go to a gallery. A similar occurrence happened in the V&A, when I found a portrait by William Dobson, a name I had heard of but was unaware was in the collection at the V&A.



Seeing such a wide variety of unseen art has greatly aided me in the start of A Level History of Art. We have been doing visual analysis, that is, looking at unseen paintings and observing the artist's methods. Thanks to my experience in the National Gallery in particular, I feel like I am more confident in looking at and beginning to understand paintings just by noting how the artist has constructed the image. For my most recent homework I picked a painting in the National Gallery's collection: Carlo Crivelli's "The Annunciation with St Emidius", to discuss uses of perspective and spatial recession.

Perhaps the most important thing to come out of my improved visual analysis skills I developed on the trip was my entry for Art UK and The Paul Mellon Centre's "Write on Art" prize, a national competition for GCSE/A Level students that tasked candidates with writing a 400-word essay on one piece of art from the public collection. I'm very happy to say that I was awarded runner up for the prize at an awards ceremony in September. More information is available at: <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/about/news/2022-write-on-art-winners> . For the competition, I chose a painting in my beloved Fitzwilliam Museum but the choice was much inspired by the Caravaggios I saw in the National Gallery and I could not have developed my visual analysis skills without the wide variety of art I saw in London that day in April. Only being runner up means that my essay was not published but I shall put it down below as evidence of learning from the trip:

Salvator Rosa – "Human Frailty"



I can and always will remember the painting that first triggered an emotional response for me: Salvator Rosa's "Human Frailty". It wasn't because it filled me with wonder, gave me joy or made me think particularly deeply about its creation; it was because I hated it.

I avoided it every time I went to Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum as a child, and I turned my back when it would rear its ghastly head through the glass doors of the Italian Room. This was because it terrified me, and thinking about it now, Rosa would probably be pleased about that.

Grief-stricken in tone and deathly tenebristic in composition, the painting is an allegory about the fragility of life and its potential to extinguish at any moment: a popular subject matter in Baroque Italy. But when we consider that this was painted shortly after the 1655 Naples Plague that killed a large majority of Rosa's family including his son, who we see on the lap of Rosa's mistress Lucrezia, the painting not only becomes allegorical, it becomes deeply tragic and personal.

What had me cowering in fear as a child, unaware of Rosa's grief, was the winged skeleton that dominates the canvas. It swoops down in an almost graceful arc and grasps the arm of the child, forcing him to write the chilling inscription of: 'Conception is a sin, Birth is pain, Life is toil, Death a necessity'. And perhaps what is even more awful is its sickening grin that flashes out of the bleak blackness. Death, manifested in this awful creature, takes pleasure in toying with the artist's grief. Immediately juxtaposed by the skeleton are two children who play with bubbles and fireworks, which are metaphors for life itself: here now, gone in an instant. They are dwarfed by the bringer of death that hovers above them but the carelessness with which they play, unaware of the impending horror above them, turns these

children not into a lively motif of happiness but victims, much like Rosa's son also, of life's cruel and fleeting shortness.

I still visit the Fitzwilliam and I still love it as much as I did as a young boy. But I no longer hate this painting. I actively seek it out, get up close and stare at it, reminiscing about how it once scared that little boy all those years ago. But in no way has it lost its message. Even now, Rosa's painting teaches me to enjoy what I have now, here, today.

For all that is able to burst like a bubble in a small child's hand...

As much as I am proud of this piece of writing, the most seminal of my essays was directly inspired by what I saw on the trip. Entitled "Why Art Must not be Strangled Into Meaning" the essay below recounts some of my experiences in the gallery and has a full, in-depth analysis of an often misunderstood detail in John Constable's "The Hay Wain", one of the most famous paintings in the National Gallery's collection. In the analysis, I also make reference to a full-scale sketch for the painting which I saw in the V&A. The essay hopes to dispel some of the snobby and downright false interpretations of art history that tend to alienate people from the subject. I had published this on my Medium earlier this year, but in the interview I said that my writing would be the evidence of what I had learnt so I shall put the essay below:

Why Art Must Not Be Strangled Into Meaning.

Art can be, if not decoded into some form of coherent meaning, highly inaccessible. Take [Room 10](#) in London's National Gallery with its 5 Titians as an example; those who are not well versed in the works of Roman poet Ovid, as many, including myself, are, would most likely struggle trying to grasp the subject matter of the 5 aforementioned paintings by the Venetian master because in order to understand them, one must have some knowledge of the stories in the "*Metamorphoses*" by Ovid that inspired them. Hence why it is so important that in order to keep Titian's work engaging to a modern audience, art historians and curators must provide relevant and understandable background to the somewhat long-winded stories of "*Diana and Callisto*", "*Diana and Actaeon*" and "*Bacchus and Ariadne*" (the last of these being a painting I have already talked about [here](#)) that feature in these particular artworks because if a viewer, who is new to the painting, understands the story, then they appreciate it much more and will, as a result, undoubtedly *enjoy* it much more. The National Gallery is particularly fabulous at this and always provides reasoned, logical and straightforward background information to a painting's creation and subject. Upon my first visit to the gallery earlier this year, I walked around [Room 34](#) (which contains

the Constables, Turners, Reynolds and other famous British works) next to a family and a young lady who was their tour guide. She excellently explained, among many things; the rivalry between Turner and Constable, the history of the famous “*Fighting Temeraire*” and George Stubbs’ fondness to painting horses.

What I was pleased to hear in this short but no less enriching tour of art history was an absence of trying to find hidden meanings which are completely unrelated to the artist’s intention or interpretations of subject matter that would not line up with the nature of that artist’s life context or their other works. *This* sort of “art history” is the type that tries to strangle and torture some kind of profound message out of a sculpture, painting, photograph etc despite it not being there at all and quite frankly, I don’t think it would be unfair to deem this sort of artistic observation not art history at all, and unfortunately, it is worryingly prevalent. In reality, it does not teach or share anything of worth and is instead pedalled by those wishing to flaunt their vast vocabulary, be it in writing or speech, and twist an artist’s message into something so vague and profound that rather than actually managing to put the artist’s work into context and understanding its intention, they consequently do a disservice to that artist and ruin the *true* intention or message. Whilst it is sometimes impossible to understand what some artists wished to put forward in their work, historical context of their life should be able to rule out what is certainly *not* intended, as I shall demonstrate later with John Constable’s iconic “Hay Wain” also located in Room 34 of the National Gallery. It truly saddens me when conspiracy theories take precedent over well considered and researched evidence, for example the delusional theory that the Mona Lisa is, in fact, a man or even a self-portrait of Leonardo himself is not art history, and although it is not endorsed by the Louvre just as it shouldn’t be, the fact that such a theory exists is not only laughable it is directly threatening to the integrity of Leonardo’s work. We, as art historians and lovers, have a duty to Titian, Leonardo and every other artist to keep their work engaging, accessible and just as loved as they currently are to our fellow population. Blatantly false and far-fetched artistic interpretations do not do this, instead they make art that can already be relatively inaccessible more inaccessible than it ever needs to be, and that is not only dangerous; it has the potential to ruin what we must protect.



The Fighting Temeraire by JMW Turner, Credit: The National Gallery

In 1967, the French literary critic Roland Barthes proposed in his essay “The Death of the Author” that it was impossible to ascertain the true meaning behind a writer’s work and that instead, the meaning, if there was one, was decided by that particular work’s audience’s interpretation of the text. Barthes further argued that the context of the author’s life and their experiences in no way served as an explanation of the text’s subject matter.

Whilst literature and visual art are very much different, they are both arts, therefore I feel it is interesting to bring Barthes’ argument into the subject of art history. Whilst Barthes’ argument has merit, I do believe that it also has fundamental issues. I agree wholeheartedly that an artwork’s true message can never be fully understood or even conceived as we ourselves are not it’s true creator, but to suggest that the audience of that artwork has the freedom to decide what it’s creator was or wasn’t trying to communicate may, in fact, most likely will, lead to far-fetched interpretations full of assumptions that would not be supported by evidence, and in my opinion would not honour the context of that artist’s life. And yes, whilst Barthes argued against using context as evidence for or against a particular

interpretation of literature, I believe that its importance cannot be understated; and whilst I'm aware that context must not always be seen as the definitive answer to an artist's choice of subject matter or meaning, when the correct context exists to sway the interpretation of an artwork in a particular way, the interpretation that matches best with the relevant context and makes the least assumptions about the artists intentions must be the interpretation of the work that is believed and pursued.

Let me put the importance of context on display by discussing an often misinterpreted detail in John Constable's "Hay Wain":



Credit: The National Gallery

In Kelly Grovier's book "A New Way of Seeing", Grovier does not see Constable's charming and much adored view of the Suffolk countryside as charming or picturesque, like most do. Instead, in an introductory note to the painting he writes:

"It may be among the most widely reproduced images of the English countryside, perfect for biscuit tins and kitchen aprons, yet Constable's seemingly idyllic landscape is as haunted by ghosts as any painting in art history"

(Copyright: Kelly Grovier 2019)

The “ghosts” that Grovier is referring to are neither metaphorical or symbolic, they are, according to him, actually present in the painting’s composition. Cast your eye to the bottom of the canvas and look at the dark form that emerges next to the dog on the riverbank, this is the ghostly equestrian rider that Grovier claims haunts Constable’s unspoilt masterpiece...

Except, it isn’t a ghost at all and therefore should not be analysed as one.



The Hay Wain “Ghost”, Credit: The National Gallery

Grovier bases much of his following essay on the form he believes to be a ghost, questioning whether the spectral rider is somehow a symbolic representation of the countryside changing and being lost during the Industrial Revolution that was greatly changing Britain during the painting’s creation between 1820 and 1821. Grovier further comments that the dog seems to

be “*barking at the rider’s nothingness*” and that this alerts us to the sense of loss that is delivered throughout the whole scene.

One simple look at the dog will reveal that it is most definitely not barking at the rider as Grovier claims. In fact, it is neither directing its gaze at the “ghost” or barking at all. It merely pads the riverbank, looking out at the hay cart on the river, panting as it does so.

Certainly, once you are alerted to the presence of this apparent “ghost” it becomes nearly impossible to miss. After reading Grovier’s passage in his book, I found my eyes wondering to the bottom of the frame every time I would see the Hay Wain, trying to spot the ghostly horseman that Grovier had mentioned in his book. Despite this, I was always sceptical about its presence. It did not seem to fit within the scope of Constable’s other works or the artist’s nature as a painter.

My initial scepticism was correct, what the “ghost” actually is, is a fascinating insight into the working method of Constable’s technique. It demonstrates to us how meticulous the artist was in his design and shows us the development of the painting over the time he worked on it. The figure resembles a horse and rider because that is exactly what it is, however it was later painted out of the picture by Constable to adjust the composition. We can see that it was Constable’s original plan to place a horse exactly where the “ghost” is in the finished Hay Wain by examining a full-scale oil study for the painting now in London’s V&A museum:



Credit: The Victoria and Albert Museum

Clearly Constable had begun painting the other horseman into the final version that he was later to exhibit at the Royal Academy, but had decided to paint it out during the work's final stages of completion. The reason we see a glimpse of the horseman today is because over time the slow deterioration of the paint and the way in which it has dried has caused Constable's original composition to show through the paint layer above it. It may also be likely that the artist had not quite painted out the horseman as thoroughly as he intended to.

Our comparison of Constable's finished Hay Wain and its partnering oil study reveal to us that the "ghost" is not a ghost at all but rather a compositional edit on behalf of the artist. However, it is also important to remember that John Constable was not an artist who was inclined to paint ghosts. From the very onset of his career, Constable opposed the idea of painting from the artist's own imagination, which was put forward by institutes such as the Royal Academy, and resorted instead to what he knew and loved best: nature. He was a painter incredibly dedicated to the craft of being accurate to the natural world he enjoyed as a boy in Suffolk. The Hay Wain is no different, Constable was very familiar with the scene of the painting, his family owned the mill which is very near to the site of the composition and

the house seen in the left of the canvas belonged to the family's neighbour, a tenant farmer called Willy Lott and it features in other small Constable works.

Constable was a painter who set about to capture nature as best as he possibly could, famously making countless studies of the sky and its clouds. Every large-scale work that he would undertake would be prefaced by intense open-air, on-site studies in oil, watercolour and drawing. To paint in a ghost would seem to reject everything he strove for as a painter. He is quoted as once saying:

"Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?"

All of this gives us extremely plausible and logical evidence to suggest that the Hay Wain "ghost" is not a ghost at all, as I have previously said. I could present many more quotes from Constable himself to demonstrate to the reader that he was not the kind of painter to put ghosts in his pictures, but for the sake of being concise I shall not bore you with more of them. But yet, despite all this evidence, I still cannot reject the fact that maybe, Constable did paint a ghost into the Hay Wain deliberately. It would be ignorant and pompous for me to assume that I know exactly what Constable wished to paint into his pictures. Only a direct word of mouth quotation from Constable saying something such as "I did not paint a ghost in the Hay Wain" would give us *definitive* proof.

When one is trying to ascertain the meaning of an artwork, I suggest applying the philosophical principle of Occam's Razor, first proposed in the 13th Century by the English theologian William of Occam. It states, quite simply, that the simplest answer is often the "best" answer, i.e. the most correct. Key to the principle is the idea that the answer with the least blindly made assumptions is also more likely to be the correct answer. This is because blind assumptions are the antithesis of logical, researched evidence and hence are more likely to be incorrect. To demonstrate the merits of Occam's principle let us compare our two possible theories regarding the ghost in the Hay Wain:

Either John Constable, one of the greatest landscape painters of the 18th century, decided to abort his stringent and precise approach to painting nature as exactly and accurately as

possible for *one* painting that he was to exhibit along with many others at the Royal Academy in 1819–1825. In this painting of his father's mill he deliberately painted a ghostly horseman to symbolise a multitude of ideas regarding loss, the Industrial Revolution and the dying English countryside. The V&A's oil sketch tells us that Constable originally wished to paint another horseman into the picture but later changed his mind and painted a ghost instead.

Or, the "ghost" in the Hay Wain is merely a compositional edit by an artist who was almost surgical in his approach to painting, The V&A oil sketch reveals to us that Constable initially intended to place another horseman in the composition and had begun to paint it into the final version. For whatever reason, perhaps to declutter the scene, he painted it out at a late stage of the work's completion. The passing of time and the slow drying process of oil paint has caused some of Constable's early composition to emerge under the top paint layer, creating a form that resembles a ghostly horse and rider. Also, from Constable's own testimonies on his attitude to painting and our knowledge of his working methods we can safely suggest that the "ghost" is most likely the result of an artist at work rather than a deliberately made addition by Constable.

Occam's Razor, when employed in this case, would obviously support the latter of the two interpretations. When assumptions are made, they are not blindly suggested but strengthened by previous evidence. Irrespective of the word count of our two answers, the second is also much more simple and coherent. It is much more straightforward to assume that Constable wanted to change his composition to something less busy rather than wanting to paint a ghost into his picture to serve as a symbolic motif. The contextual evidence we have available to us also supports the first interpretation much more convincingly. The first answer has no relevant evidence to suggest that Constable deliberately meant to paint a ghost and as far as I am aware, that evidence does not exist.

Why then, despite all the evidence suggesting that the Hay Wain ghost doesn't exist, do some art historians still talk about it? In my opinion, it is essentially spreading false information about an artwork. If our job is to educate people about art and the artists that made it, then it is completely unfair and irresponsible to start toying with a painting's meaning for the sake of being profound. What good is profundity when the facts do not agree? The more you look for hidden meanings, the more you dilute the artwork and make it dull. In the time I've spent writing about a tiny detail of the Hay Wain that is frankly completely unimportant, I could have written about what a wonderful symphony of colour it is, how Constable did away with

the awful brown English landscapes that came before him with this picture in a splendid and vivid exhibition of green, I could have mentioned his wonderfully expressive and loose manipulation of paint on the canvas or perhaps just the simplistic beauty of this masterpiece; the richness, the heartiness, the freshness and the happiness of it all. When I look at the Hay Wain I am reminded of a quote by the first president of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds:

“A mere copier of nature can never produce anything great.”

It's a shame he died some 30 years before the Hay Wain was painted, because my word, was he was wrong...

So then, to my fellow art historians and lovers, for the sake of making art accessible to others and not creating confusion and conspiracy around artworks to the extent they become boring and lose what they originally set out to communicate; can we do away with the incessant need to find some potentially philosophically deep and challenging hidden meaning in every conceivable thing that enters a museum? Can we stop with the snooty remarks about Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" where we suggest that the ecstasy is not religious but a different kind? Can we stop the endless spew of nonsense about the Mona Lisa? Can we stop sponsoring the ridiculous conspiracies about another famous Leonardo: The Last Supper? And instead, can we principally focus on doing justice to the original creator of the artwork rather than potentially bending their intention into something more exciting and abstract just because it looks better as a headline or makes your new book more likely to shift units?

We signed up to be historians, and that means trying to find what the artist was saying. Not you. If you identify with an artwork for a particular reason, whatever it may be, fine, that is wonderful, but identifying with an artwork does not give you the right to decide what its meaning is without sufficient evidence and knowledge to back up your claim. Barthes may have claimed that biographical and contextual evidence was the breeder of interpretative tyranny, but the way I see it, logical evidence is instead the *antidote* to interpretative tyranny, it prevents the viewer toying with the artist's intentions. Because, it is far more tyrannical to take a piece of art and mould it into something that the artist intended it not to be. I dread to imagine John Constable's disappointment if he was able to read all the drivel that is spouted about that "ghost" in one of his finest pictures.

If there is one thing I've learnt about art, it's that "hidden" meanings are often the most meaningless of all. Art must speak clearly between the viewer and itself, not in symbolic or metaphorical tongues. Some art does reveal itself slowly, but that does contribute to a wider meaning that underlines the whole piece. Images do not speak as clearly or coherently as words, therefore "hidden" meanings do not make an artwork more meaningful, they dilute that meaning and create a confusing, overly-abstract piece of art that eventually ends up communicating well, nothing. I am aware that once again, it would be ignorant for me to assume that hidden or alternative meanings never exist in pieces of art, but just because their presence appears in other artworks doesn't mean they exist in *all* artworks as too many of us seem to assume.

And that brings me back to the title of this essay, the "strangling" of art. Because that is what the Hay Wain "ghost" and many other unfortunate misinterpretations of artworks are, they are the result of a strangling. They occur when someone takes a piece of art and shapes it into a malformed image of what it once was, creating something new and exciting, but equally incorrect and misinforming. Our duty as art historians is to try and honour an artist's work by presenting and commenting on it in a way that we believe, supported by that all-important contextual evidence, would honour that artist's intention and their nature as a thinker and a person. What a tremendous honour it is for us to examine and present such fabulous art by such excellent artists to the current and next generations; what a disservice it is to those excellent artists to potentially jeopardise what they set about to say in their art through arrogantly and blindly made assumptions about the meaning of their work.

I am due to visit the National Gallery again this summer, and this time, when I look at the Hay Wain, I shall not look at that "ghost" as I foolishly did last time. I shall look at the trees, the mill, the cart, the dog, the sky and the sheer natural beauty of it all. And when I do, I know that I will be safe in the knowledge that most likely, through thorough research on the man himself, those will be the things John Constable would be the most happy for me to see...

The End.

But, to move beyond art, there were many non-cultural aspects of the trip that me and Sophie benefitted from, particularly the navigation around London itself. At the interview we said that we would be mostly using cabs and buses to move around the city, but during the trip we had much more time than expected, so we walked. Aided by Google Maps, we found

this a very enjoyable experience and saw a lot more of London than we would have if we had used cabs. It also gave us time to stop for food and look in a few shops throughout the day. The biggest walk we undertook was from the V&A to the National Gallery. Luckily this was almost exclusively straight down Piccadilly so the navigation was not too hard. One of my university options is in London, so learning to navigate what is such a big city has given me some great experience in learning where things are. And even if I do not end up going to university in London, the experience of making your way around somewhere you do not know is a skill I can transfer into many different aspects of life. When we discussed what we would write into our reports, Sophie agreed with this and found the travelling aspect of the trip extremely educational and important.

So, to conclude, me and Sophie's London trip was extremely enjoyable and educational. I learnt so much about artists I had never heard of and finally got to see some paintings that I had always wanted to see. As I hope I have demonstrated, the trip has greatly assisted me in my writing and studies. Once again, I would like to thank the trust for their generosity and I do believe congratulations are in order for the 100th anniversary of Henry Morris' start as Cambridgeshire's chief education officer. I do hope you enjoyed the centenary celebrations, your charity is an amazing opportunity for young people to pursue their interests and passions and I hope it continues to do so for many years...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Thy', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.