Recognising the importance of art in Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment

The 3rd Edition of Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA3), published in 2013, reminds us that landscape architects should consider the importance of art and literature in the assessment of landscape and views. This applies particularly where art attributes a value to the identity of an area such as ‘Constable Country’ in Suffolk (GLVIA3, 2013: 82). Landscape character and views can be important issues for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), frequently examined at hearings. GLVIA 3 also expands upon the attribution of value in a landscape baseline and acknowledges that an area of landscape which does not have either a national or local designation is not necessarily without value (GLVIA3, 2013: 83).

TEP has recently worked on the Environmental Impact Assessment for a NSIP in Suffolk, including part of the Dedham Vale AONB in ‘Constable Country’. Artists have been inspired by aspects of the countryside of the study area but each has used the landscape and its elements in a unique way depending on their perceptions of the Suffolk landscape. The importance of local artists, includingConstable, Gainsborough, and Morris, was initially acknowledged in desk-based landscape assessment and later discussed with local landscape specialists.

From TEP’s perspective, John Constable’s approach was the most straightforward of the local artists. His paintings frequently captured a ‘snapshot’ in time with identifiable viewpoints and subjects. Some views are still recognisable today, albeit generally with many more trees, and can be identified for the purposes of an assessment as ‘valued views’.

Thomas Gainsborough is known to have valued the individual landscape features that made up the Suffolk countryside. Paintings, such as ‘Mr and Mrs Andrews’, focus upon a portrait of the individuals with the landscape becoming subservient although still identifiable through the distinctive landscape features captured in the view.

It can be difficult to identify exact viewpoints from which scenes he painted can be recognised and some of his work has been interpreted to fit a style rather than capturing a view. To a certain extent, it could be said that the technique of landscape character assessment conveniently lends itself to an analysis of the features valued by Gainsborough.

Another interesting, and more recent, artist was Sir Cedric Morris who was resident in the study area for part of his life. In common with Gainsborough, Morris used the Suffolk countryside as inspiration and setting for his paintings and his images depict, for example, birds in lush hedgerows against rolling, wooded landscapes. Morris was outspoken in his opposition to farming practices and the agricultural intensification which impacted upon the local birdlife that he valued. The painting ‘Landscape of Shame’ (c1960), presenting the stark image of a bare field with its dead birds, is powerful in its simplicity and is in dramatic contrast to his earlier works of local landmarks, including ‘Stoke-by-Nayland Church’.

The Brett Valley is the landscape which is said to have inspired Sir Cedric Morris and where he established his art school. TEP’s observations of the modern valley floor describe the type of intensification that Morris condemned with its proliferation of horse paddocks and modern infrastructure. However, landscape is not static and the valley is a good example of the effects of developmental pressures and the resulting changes to simple landscapes.

Locally significant artists have been cited as reasons for the designation of the Dedham Vale AONB and management of this resource is carried out through the ‘Managing a Masterpiece’ Project. However, discussion is also directed towards those areas which have been accorded a local designation or, in some cases, no designation at all.
At this level it is more difficult to value the importance of an area as the inspiration for a resident artist. In the words of a great human geographer, ‘without exception, humans grow attached to their native places, even if these should seem derelict of quality to outsiders’ (Tuan, 1974).

The project has presented an interesting perspective on local artists and their influence. In areas such as ‘Constable Country’, the artistic importance of an area can be considered as a stand-alone report by an appropriately experienced and qualified landscape art historian but at the baseline stage of LVIA, it is also important to consider an overview of the artistic significance in the context of a Landscape or Visual Assessment.

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References: