Tiger in a Tropical Storm and The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope: A Comparative Essay Of Artworks

Henri Rousseau is traditionally known for his outlandish and lush jungle landscapes incorporating the use of surrealism and fantasy styles of art. He has been greatly influential to the art world because he influenced many other artists and contributed to and paved the way for the surrealism movement and naïve art.

This essay will critically analyse two of his artworks entitled ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ and ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ using the art elements including point, line, shape, colour, texture and tone. The artworks will also be compared and contrasted with their imagery, use of colour, style of art, themes of surrealism and fantasy as well as atmosphere.

Born in Laval, Mayenne, May 21, 1844, Henri Rousseau passed away at the age of 66 in Paris, France, September 2, 1910. It was not until the age of 49 that Rousseau had become a professional artist. Before this, he went through many jobs. When he was 19, he worked for a lawyer, and in 1861, he had a job as a clerk for the local bailiff. Later in 1863, he served the army for 4 years to escape a jail sentence. He became a government employee in Paris, in 1863, to help his mother. Rousseau became a collector of octroi tax on products entering Paris, in 1871. He would teach painting lessons and do other odd tasks as well. Going serious with painting in his early forties, he finally became a full-time artist at age 49. To make up for any money he was not able to make, he would play the violin as a street musician.

Although Rousseau took art classes at his boarding school, he had no formal art training and was – for the most part – a self-taught artist. He would teach himself through copying paintings in art museums. Additionally, by sketching in the city’s history museums and botanical gardens, as he once claimed he had “no teacher other than nature”. ('The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope', n.d.) Even before he become a full-time artist he would often paint as a hobby in his free time.

The main subject matter for Rousseau’s artworks included naturistic elements, such as plants and/or animals, though jungles in particular were a reoccurring theme. The place he received his inspiration with drawing and painting his plants and animals was from illustrated books, the botanical garden in Paris and the tableaux of “taxidermified” wild animals. He also met with soldiers who had survived the French expedition to Mexico and listened to their stories of the country. Rousseau was quite fascinated by the jungle and its creatures due its fantasy and dreamlike elements. He described his numerous visits to the Jardin des Plante to the critic Arsene Alexandre: “When I go into the glass houses and I see the strange plants of exotic lands it seems to me that I enter into a dream”. ('Biography of Henri Julien Rousseau', n.d.) As he had never been to a jungle or seen one before, he grew interest in it and would use information he gathered from various places to create a picture of it for himself in his mind which he then used to turn into paintings.

Surrealism is a movement in art that thrived during the early twentieth century; it’s intended at conveying imaginative dreams and visions unrestricted from conscious logical control. Fantasy is the imagining of impossible or implausible things. Throughout his paintings, Rousseau applies

these quite clearly, as seen with many fantasy elements and real objects and things that are twisted or altered in a way that isn't real or seen in reality.

'Tiger in a Tropical Storm', the first artwork to discuss was painted in 1891 using oil paints as the medium. It's about a tiger getting ready to pounce on its prey, amid an intense storm, in the jungle. The painting had been exhibitioner in 1891, at the Salon des Indépendants which was open to all artists. It had mainly received mixed reviews, although some had described it as a "must see". His inspiration for it would have come from the botanical gardens in France, books, images and taxidermy versions. However, the tiger originated from the very tiger, a motif, seen in many of Eugène Delacroix's paintings. The animal's prey cannot be seen on the canvas and is left up to the viewer's imagination, although later, Rousseau stated that it's a group of explorers. "Surprise!" the original title of the artwork suggests the tiger has the upper hand and is ambushing the target.

The tiger has his ears pricked back, eyes alert and looking straight ahead, assumed to be staring straight ahead at his prey. He is illuminated and only shown through a flash of lightning. Crouching atop a bush of leaves, it appears as if the tiger is floating. As its set in a jungle, the painting is full of flora surrounding the tiger: from trees, bushes, leaves, ferns and various grasses, along with many other kinds of plants. Through the trees, the dark sky can be seen with the rain all throughout the painting and the lightning strike.

Rousseau has used fantasy and surrealism in a number of ways. Though it may or may not be intentional, the tiger appears to be quite different to an actual tiger. It looks more rounded and softer than the real thing; through the sharp fangs and intimidating expression it can even be said to be cuddly, in a way. It closely resembles the style used in traditional Asian art as seen with the appearance of the tiger's face. This childish style is likely to be due to Rousseau not actually seeing one before as he never travelled outside of the country. The only references for him would have been tigers from the zoo, images, books and others.

The size of particular leaves is quite exaggerated as well, an example being the leaves from the plant in the foreground being bigger than the tiger's head. Additionally, even though the tiger is standing on leaves, the leaves are not compressing from the weight; this makes it appear as if the creature is floating.

The art elements that have been used in 'Tiger in a Tropical Storm' will now be discussed.

Point is seen with medium-sized spots that make up the tiger's eye.

In the background, curved, broad lines and thinner lines were used for the trees and branches; along with the thicker lines of the grass in the foreground to create the sense of distance and scale. There is also the simple crosshatching seen over the entirety of the painting which creates the appearance of rain. Jagged lines are applied to create the strike of lightning.

Various organic shapes were used to define the many plants; trees, leaves and grasses; and the tiger. A few geometric shapes can also be seen with triangles as the teeth and squares in the fur pattern on the animal's tail.

A feathery texture is suggested as seen with the reed grass. The artwork gives off a "grainy" feel through the crosshatching of rain.

A dull colour palette and dark tone has been used throughout the painting, especially to show the shadows on the trees. Lighter tones are utilised over ranges where the light covers.

Primarily, a mix of dark and light colours have been used, due to the nature of a storm and the illumination. Amongst the various shades of green in the forest, red and orange is also used to contrast against it. Areas close to and directly at the tiger are brighter than others, showing hints of yellow, as that is where the lightning illuminates.

The overall atmosphere of the artwork feels dreary and desolate, due to the gloominess of the storm, the dark colours and dullness of the palette.

Titled ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope,’ is the second artwork to be discussed and was painted in 1905 using oil paints.

The artwork is set in a typical one of Rousseau’s jungles, with – as the title suggests – a lion throwing itself onto an antelope, biting into its flesh. It is said he was inspired by a diorama he saw in the Natural History Museum in Paris for this painting. He had also written a longer caption along with it, translated into English as follows: 'The lion, being hungry, throws itself on the antelope, [and] devours it. The panther anxiously awaits the moment when it too can claim its share. Birds of prey have each torn a piece of flesh from the top of the poor animal which sheds a tear. The sun sets.' ('The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope', n.d.)

Describe what you can see in the artwork:

The lion is standing up on its hind legs with its back arched over and forelegs over the antelope, paws digging into its skin. Its biting into the flesh, with blood dripping out at the bite, the prey also has a wound at its side and near the side of its back leg. The antelope is standing in a stretch of dark grass with its forelegs outstretched, shedding a tear from its eye. They’re surrounded by a lush jungle, full of trees, blades of grass and other ferns, with branches creating an arch around the two animals, revealing the jungle to be vast behind them. There is a panther lying in wait atop a branch, an owl and another bird perched on trees who have ripped pieces of flesh for themselves. In the left of the painting, there appears to be an ape-crow-like creature lurking within the trees as well. Along with the blue evening sky, scattered the orange wisps of clouds and the setting sun.

Themes of fantasy and surrealism have been used in many ways. Interestingly, the lion appears a bit different from the usual. With a lack of a mane as with the absence of fur around the top of the head and no fangs; this style gives it somewhat of a childish appearance. The same can be said for the antelope. Most species have horns, whereas this one doesn’t; the snout also looks strange with its shape, moreover, it doesn’t seem like it has a mouth. In addition to this, the antelope is shedding a tear, which is unusual as most animals don’t cry. A noticeable feature about the two animals is that they’re in a jungle which is not their usual habitat and it would be extremely difficult for them to survive there. The ape-crow-like creature doesn’t look like any real animal, believing to be imagined by Rousseau. Aside from the animals, the sun is abnormally big, especially for it being in the distance, in the background of the artwork.

This artwork ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope,’ also uses the art elements.

Point was used in a few ways. A pattern of dots is made to create the leopard’s fur and the

owl’s feathers. Large and smaller spots also make up the animals’ eyes.

Extremely thin lines have been used for the grass in the foreground with also thin crosshatching to create a grassy effect. Thicker lines were used to define larger blades of grass along with the stems and branches of other plants.

Curved, organic shapes have been used to create and define the many elements of nature in the painting. Examples of this is with the animals and leaves and branches of the plants.

The crosshatching in the grass gives it a carpeted, feather-like texture. Strokes in the lion’s fur make it appear to be soft, even fluffy, compared to the antelope, which does not seem to have fur, only smooth skin.

Light tones have been used in the sky, highlights and skin of the antelope, and with the distant light seen throughout the trees. Whilst, dark tones have been used within the trees and leaves, as well as in the shadows.

Colour can be identified through the many colours. The painting uses a vivid assortment of greens and much brown through the whole painting. The blue sky provides a break from the overwhelming green. Similarly, the orange clouds and vibrant red setting sun create an even more distinct difference, contrasting against the green and attracting attention to the sun. This leads the eyes to and frames the lion and antelope as they both and the sun are centred in the artwork.

The overall atmosphere of the artwork feels cold and harsh. This is due to the use of dark colours and scene that is playing out – the antelope shedding a tear, wounded and in pain, the lion biting into it, and the surrounding animals that have either already taken a piece of the antelope’s fresh or are waiting to.

Henri Rousseau’s artworks ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ and ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ have been individually analysed in depth in the above paragraphs. Even though they are two different paintings they have similarities. The shared attributes they have in common include imagery, colour, style, atmosphere and surrealism and fantasy. Regarding imagery, they are set in a jungle, contain plants, trees, grass and ferns. Each show animals, specially felines, hunting. They both a variety of greens and include hints of orange, brown, black and white. ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ and ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ were painted in a naïve style with surrealism. Elements of surrealism and fantasy is shown with the childlike appearance and missing features of the animals which differ from their real life equivalent. Particular things are made out to be quite large, much larger than what they would regularly be, which is another example of surrealism and fantasy.

On the other hand, they also have differences. In ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ its storming, and therefore has thunder and rain while ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ has an evening sky with a setting sun and peach-coloured clouds. Apart from this and the different animals, there is quite an evident difference in colour. ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ is lush, showing a range of greens, a blue sky hinted with red and many shadows. Whilst “Tiger in a Tropical Storm” is full of dark yellow-greens, and browns, giving it a murky, almost grimy effect. Due to the style and appearance of the tiger (in ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’) particularly its face, it is presumed that traditional Asian art had some kind of influence or

inspiration over Rousseau, as it greatly resembles the style. Though it may not be obvious, there is a large abnormity in and ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’; the lion and antelope are in the jungle. Not being its natural habitat, you would never find them in a jungle, and it would be extremely difficult for them to survive in that environment; as such this would be a surreal/fantasy element. ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ gives a gloomy mood with the storm and a feeling of anticipation and suspense wondering what the tiger’s prey is. In contrast to the other painting, which gives off a cold and harsh atmosphere through its scene and causes sympathy and pity to the onlooker.

In closing, it is apparent that Henri Rousseau was heavily influenced by his imagination, nature and the stories of soldiers. He uses these aspects to freely envision and produce his paintings, through using various techniques, such as painting in layers and using an exceedingly large range of shades, as he would sometimes use over 50 shades of green. It is clear from the analysis of his two artworks ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ and ‘The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope’ he has artistically used the art elements including point, line, shape, colour, texture and tone. His artworks are successful because they contain a uniqueness with child-like qualities derived from his own style and history with art. Also, it proves how creative and accurate the imagination can be, as he painted all his jungle artworks without ever travelling there and with only inspiration from other sources to speak of. Rousseau’s artworks and creativity are important to the modern world as he influenced and inspired many artists throughout the decades and contributed greatly to the world of naïve art and surrealism. He not only continues to inspire and interest people today, but he also demonstrates the importance and power of imagination.