

## **APPRECIATING PAINTINGS**

Paintings can be complex things to appreciate in an informed fashion. Such informed appreciation can be undertaken via a number of different methods:

Firstly, the artistic methods and techniques undertaken can be examined. Thus, Jan Van Eyck was famous for his oil painting technique, which produced a characteristic luminous finish. Michelangelo was renowned for his fresco technique, and for his skill with anatomy and male nudes. Leonardo da Vinci was famous for his sfumato, and Rembrandt for his chiaroscuro. Titian and Matisse (amongst others) were distinguished by their colourism, Caravaggio for his Tenebrism, and Frank Auerbach for his impasto. These techniques, and many others, are an important feature of informed art appreciation.

Secondly, COLOUR has always been a very important aspect to consider, and often, throughout history, the use of colour has been subject to certain rules and conventions. For example, Ancient Egyptian paintings only made use of 6 colours – red, green, blue, yellow, white and black. Red was the colour of power and authority. Green was used as a colour to indicate new life and fertility. Blue was the colour of rebirth, while yellow was used to represent eternal things like the sun, and gold. White was indicative of purity, and black was the colour of death. As an extension of some of these principles, male bodies were painted in darker colours than female bodies.

Byzantine icon paintings followed similar conventions: Blue was the colour representing human life, while white became the colour used to represent the resurrection and transfiguration of Christ. In icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary, Christ was usually depicted wearing a red undergarment, together with a blue outer garment (symbolising the idea of God becoming a man). Conversely, Mary was usually depicted wearing a blue undergarment, and a red outer garment (indicative of someone starting off entirely human and mortal, but moving closer to God).

During the Renaissance, burgeoning European art academies restricted the use of bright colours, which were only to be used in the most appropriate contexts. It is only much later in European history, with the advent of the French Impressionists and the Fauvists, that colour really

became utilised independently, and without restriction. Of course, the development of new colour pigments also had a significant impact on the tonal range available to painters. – After all, a Renaissance colour palette was a very different thing to the palette available to a 19<sup>th</sup> century artist.

## **The narrative content of a painting (How to appreciate it).**

In order to make an informed judgement, we can subdivide the narrative content of a painting into 4 parts: a) The main message. b) Subsidiary messages. c) Symbolism. d) References and analogies. (At the end of this section, under Activities, you will be given the opportunity of carrying out some research, and completing an initial assessment of the narrative content of a famous Renaissance painting, using these 4 subheadings).

## **Interpreting Western art (c.500 – 1700).**

Byzantine art, and its icons, together with other hieratic styles such as the Gothic, was packed with narrative meaning and symbolism – but all of a Christian kind. This exclusive focus on Christian symbolism makes the art somewhat easier to decode, though the fantastic imagery of Renaissance altarpiece art of the sort produced by Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder can be more difficult to work out. Much baroque painting was more straightforward, as (during the era of the Counter Reformation) its focus was mostly just on the promotion of Catholicism. Its best works consisted of trompe l'oeil ceiling frescoes and other monumental religious works. Even here, there were some exceptions, such as the Realist School within Dutch Baroque art, which possessed much complex imagery and symbolism.

## **Dutch Realism 1630-90.**

Some exceptional schools arose in the newly independent (from Spain) protestant areas of the United Provinces, such as those in Amsterdam, Delft, Utrecht and Haarlem. Dutch realism really developed as a result of the historical context. – The 17<sup>th</sup> century was the period of the Dutch 'Golden Age' in which trade grew with the East Indies, and other areas of the world, and Dutch merchants grew rich on the profits. These merchants were a new type of art buyer, requiring a new type of painting, and they commissioned some of the most complex still life paintings ever produced,

by the likes of Vermeer, Rembrandt, Willem Kalf, van Hoogstraten and others.

## **The Decline of Religious Paintings from 1700.**

Religious art declined elsewhere (not just in the United Provinces) because of the decline in the number of ecclesiastical patrons available, and the rise of the secular, middle class/professional patron, who wanted – and paid for – small scale portable paintings which could be displayed in their homes. Moreover, these new buyers wanted portraits, landscapes or genre paintings (rather than massive religious allegorical works) which showed off their newly acquired power and status. As a consequence, this ‘new’ type of painting lacked obscure religious symbolism, and can be easier to interpret.

## **Interpreting paintings from 1700 onwards.**

For analytical purposes, these can be divided into 5 main types: i) HISTORY paintings ii) PORTRAITS iii) GENRE paintings (of everyday scenes) iv) LANDSCAPES v) STILL LIFE.

### **History Paintings:**

This category of paintings can include mythological, religious and historical works with a ‘narrative’ which can be difficult to interpret when designed to convey inspirational or philosophical sentiments.

### **Portraits:**

This category of painting is generally easier to interpret, though it must be remembered that the buyer of a painting often prefers to purchase a ‘manipulated’ image showing him/her at their best (e.g. Sir Thomas Lawrence’s portraits of the Prince Regent during the Regency period).

### **Genre:**

These can be relatively straightforward to interpret, when the artist is focused, principally, upon portraying the social history of a particular scene. However, a genre painting can also be used to convey a philosophical message, making the interpretation more complex to determine.

## **Landscapes:**

In the hundred years between 1700-1800, many landscape paintings were commissioned by landowners who wanted a pictorial record of their estates. Thus, such paintings can be relatively straightforward to understand and interpret. However, in the later 18<sup>th</sup> Century, as the Romantic movement began to take hold, many painters went into the countryside in order to 'capture' the essence and beauty of nature – adding considerably to the meaning and purpose behind such works.

Impressionists like Pissarro and Monet can fall into this category. There are also landscapes with more of a philosophical message, which can be quite difficult to interpret fully.

## **Still Life:**

Some of this type of painting can look very static when looked at in a superficial manner. Nevertheless, the best of Still Life painting can still be loaded with symbolism, and influenced by artistic traditions going back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **How to appreciate abstract paintings.**

The key principal behind a proper appreciation of abstract paintings is the realization that FORM is just as important as REPRESENTATION. Thus, a picture of a human face could be a very anatomically inaccurate, 'bad' one, but it could have a very effective and striking use of colours or shapes, and might therefore be adjudged to be a 'beautiful' picture/painting.

Thus, form is everything, and we need to look at colours, shapes and surface textures (and their relationship to each other) when assessing and interpreting a particular piece of work.

## **ACTIVITIES**

Now that you have completed this introductory section, please have a go at the following activities. You can either talk to your tutor about the possible answers on the telephone, or via skype, or send written responses via email or post. Please enjoy thinking about your answers, and the initial research that this entails!

Task 1: Try and find out more about the artistic techniques of sfumato, chiaroscuro, colourism, Tenebrism and impasto. What did these techniques/skills actually involve?

Task 2: Try and have a look at the painting “The Garden of Earthly Delights” by Hieronymous Bosch (1500-05) either on-line or in a suitable textbook, which is one of the great Renaissance paintings. Once you have looked at a copy of the painting, and maybe read a little about it, try and complete a brief assessment of the painting’s narrative content, using the 4 subheadings described earlier in this Section.

Task 3: Using the information supplied above about the 5 main types of paintings produced from 1700 onwards, say whether you think the following 11 paintings are either history, portrait, genre, landscapes or still life works of art: Some are more straightforward than others!

**Death of Marat (1793) by Jacques-Louis David.**

**The Third of May 1808 by Francisco Goya**

**The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy (1881) by Vasily Surikov.**

**Arrangement in Grey and Black: Whistler’s Mother (1871) by James Whistler.**

**Portrait of Madame X (1883-4) by John Singer Sargent.**

**Man with a Hoe (1862) by Millet.**

**Marilyn (1967) by A. Warhol.**

**At the Moulin Rouge (1890) by Toulouse-Lautrec.**

**Ennui (1914) by Walter Sickert.**

**Mr and Mrs Andrews (1750) by T. Gainsborough.**

**Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps (1812) by JMW  
Turner**

## **On-Line Resources To Assist You.**

<https://www.khanacademy.org>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/11/hieronymus-bosch-review-a-heavenly-host-of-delights-on-the-road-to-hell>

[www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/sfumato.htm](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting/sfumato.htm)

[www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/chiaroscuro](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/chiaroscuro)

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenebrism>

[www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/impasto](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/impasto)

<https://www.xamou-art.com/word/colourism-colourist-painting/>

[www.bc.edu/bc org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neoclassicism.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neoclassicism.html)

<https://blog.oup.com/2012/05/goyas-third-of-may-1808/>

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/morning-of-the-execution-of-the-streltsy/xAGX5DyRI-AyWw>

[www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-hannibal-and-his-army-crossing-the-alps-n00490](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-hannibal-and-his-army-crossing-the-alps-n00490)

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/mar/29/how-whistlers-mother-became-a-powerful-symbol-of-the-great-depression-in-pictures>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12127>

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/61239>

<https://www.jeanmillet.org/Man-With-A-Hoe.html>

[www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artworks/61128](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artworks/61128)

[www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-ennui-n03846](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-ennui-n03846)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr\\_and\\_MrsAndrews](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr_and_MrsAndrews)

