

How to Analyse A Painting



First, we will look at what the painting is telling us and our reaction to it - the **story**, **mood** and **bias**.

Then we will see what the artist does that makes us see it and react to it in this way - the **characters**, **composition** and **technique** that he uses.

1. Story :

- a. what is the story the artist is telling? Which bit of the story?
- b. Why is the artist picking up on this particular scene? What's so important about what's happening in this particular moment?
- c. What do you think is likely to happen next, or what just happened a moment ago?
- d. Is he telling the story like you expect to see it? Is there something that surprises you in the way he tells it (from the way you imagined it) ?
- e. *Analogy*: perhaps the artist is really trying to tell you about another story – or is the artist trying to convey a spiritual or moral truth by means of these characters or events?
- f. *Symbolic*: Are there things in the painting that really represent something else?

2. Mood or Feeling

- a. What is the general mood of the picture: eg. joyful , triumphant or threatening?
- b. How can you tell? What in the picture makes it feel that way?
- c. Is there a sense of movement & drama, or calm? Tension or harmony?
- d. How does the mood fit in with the story the artist is trying to tell?

3. Beliefs and Judgments: the artist's bias

- a. Artist's opinion of the characters: who is the principal character? Who are the secondary, less important figures? Do the characters' posture, gestures or expressions betray what the artist thinks of them?
- b. Is the artist trying to put across a particular way of seeing the situation?
- c. How could the painting have been different if you had another point of view?

4. Your response

- what is your gut reaction to the painting? Can you try and pinpoint why you react to it in that way?
- which character do you sympathise with most? If you were a character in it, who would you be?
- if you were in the painting, where would you be positioned?
- have you ever felt like any of the characters? What situation does it make you remember?

Why you react and interpret a painting in the way you do, is down to **how** the artist has represented the characters, arranged the painting, and actually painted it.

ELEMENTS OF A PAINTING

A. Characters:

- a. **Gesture:** natural , or theatrical, frozen or dynamic? Meaningful or not?
- b. Emotional expression
- c. **Direction of their gaze:** what / who are they looking at? Is there a kind of dialogue going on between the characters? If so, what are they saying?
- d. **Sex:** masculinity or femininity of the characters?
- e. **Posture :** how are they standing or sitting?
What does that tell you about the emotions they are feeling, their physical body?
- f. **Clothing:** elegant or rough, rich or poor, casual or careful ?

B. Composition

- a. **Foreground:** - who is in the foreground of the picture?
- b. **Background:** - who is in the background?
- c. **Perspective/ Vanishing point:** - what is your eye drawn to? What is the focus of the painting?
- d. **Scenery, surroundings:** natural or symbolic? Sense of space, or claustrophobic?
- e. **Symbols:** are there any objects in the painting, which might be symbolising something else?
- f. **Size:** of the characters to each other & the surroundings
- g. **Exaggerations:** perhaps something doesn't look quite natural? Why do you think that is?

C. Technique

- a. **Colours:** what are the predominant colours? Do colours clash or blend?
- b. **Lighting:** - where is the light focussed on? - who is in the shadows? - where is the light coming from? Does the lighting hide or reveal elements in the painting?
- c. **Brush strokes :** - strong and obvious, or fuzzy and subtle (definite or suggestive)
 - exact or haphazard (sense of being permanent or fleeting)
 - passionate and unrestrained, or very controlled