



# PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SAME ARTWORK

## General Objective

The aim of this practical sheet is to get familiar with the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity and techniques to analyse, interpret and understand art.

In this practical sheet, you will:

- ✓ learn the definitions of subjectivity and objectivity;
- ✓ learn how to identify whether an opinion of an artwork is subjective or objective;
- ✓ learn techniques to analyse art;
- ✓ learn how to interpret artwork.

## You will need:

- ✓ A computer, laptop or tablet with internet access.

## Challenges and issues

Human beings use art as the most basic form of expression to communicate how they feel and think. Art is not only a means for artists to transmit their message; it is also a communication between the artist and the audience. Despite the popular belief that there is only one speaker in this dialogue, art is frequently presented in a way that permits it to be interpreted in a variety of ways that include audience participation. Some pieces of art may have a clear, definite meaning, in which case there is no room for fresh interpretations. However, in the vast majority of circumstances, art does not have a direct and objectively true meaning.



In order to begin an accurate analysis, we must first clarify some concepts such as subjectivity and in contrast to its antonym, objectivity.

Subjectivity: Pertaining or relating to the subject's way of thinking or feeling, and not to the object itself.

Objectivity: Pertaining or relating to the object itself, independently of one's own way of thinking or feeling.

A painting, a sculpture, a book, a play, a dance, or any other artistic output can be objectively described. However, the author's subjectivity is a key component in its production. According to its own subjectivity, the receiving public will rate the work as good or bad, beautiful or ugly.

With all of this knowledge, we may conclude that any artistic manifestation will be shaped by an objective and concrete component that can be seen, felt, or heard, as well as the creator's and receiver's subjectivity. As a result, art will always be a matter of subjectivity as long as there is freedom of expression and an infinite variety of personalities and opinions in the world.

This tutorial will help the student to analyse an artwork being able to identify whether their opinion is subjective or objective, and therefore fully enjoy the art piece.

For this we will show two activities. In the first one, students will learn how to make the right questions when it comes to analyse a piece of art; in the second one, we will see different opinions about artwork, and students will have to separate those between objective and subjective.

## Adaptation

The goal of art appreciation is to explain why we like or dislike something rather than simply whether we like it or not. For example, you may dislike a photograph because it is too gloomy, but you may still like the subject matter or value the message it conveys. Simply put, saying "I don't like this painting" isn't enough. We'd like to know why you have that impression, as well as whether you think the work has any positive characteristics.

The easiest way to get to understand and therefore appreciate a work of art is to investigate its context, or background. This is because it helps us to understand what was (or might have been) in the mind of the artist at the time he created the work in question. We can start with the following questions:

When was it created? If we don't the period, it might help with context.

Is it abstract or representational? An abstract work has quite different aims to that of a representational work, and must be judged according to different criteria.

What type of art is it? There is different styles (history, portrait, etc) so they should be compared to each other and not other types since each group usually follow the same patterns.

What school or movement is the artwork associated with?

Where was the artwork done? Knowing where and under what circumstances a painting is created can often improve our appreciation and understanding of the work concerned. Surroundings can have a major impact on an artist's mood, and therefore on his work.

At what point was the artist in his career? What was his background? Knowing whether the piece was created early or late in a artist's life can often assist our appreciation of the work. Understanding the background of the artist can also explain a huge amount about his/her art.

Once we have looked into the context of the artwork, we can begin to appreciate the work itself. Knowing how to appreciate a piece is itself an art rather than a science. And perhaps the most difficult aspect of art evaluation is judging the actual method: that is, how the actual piece has been done? These are some questions that can be useful:

What materials were used in the creation of the artwork?

What is the content & subject matter of the piece? What is being depicted in it? For example, if it's historical or mythological, ask yourself these questions:

What event is being shown? What characters are involved, and what are their roles? What message does it contain? If it's a portrait, ask yourself these questions: Who is the sitter? How does the artist portray him/her? What features or aspects of the sitter are given prominence or attention? If it's a genre-scene, ask yourself these questions: What scene is being depicted? What is happening? What message (if any) does the artist have for us? What objects - no matter how seemingly insignificant - are included in the picture? Why has the artist chosen these particular items? Why has he laid them out in the way he has?

How to appreciate beauty in an art piece? Aesthetics is a very personal subject. We all see things differently, including "art", and especially "beauty". It's easy to say whether we find a piece of art beautiful or not, but if we want to be objective and judge it by some "rules", we can ask ourselves the following questions?

What proportions are evident?

Are certain shapes or patterns repeated?

Do the colours (if any) used complement each other?

Does it draw you in? Does it maintain your attention?

How does it compare with others?

After doing some investigation, we will reach some conclusions. Then we could ask ourselves what it this piece trying to say, which we should have an idea of after the research. How it makes us feel plays a big part too, even though it's totally subjective, at the end of the day it's us who's reviewing it. We then can analyse our reaction, whether the impact mostly visual or cerebral. A different angle would also be to ask ourselves if it's something we would display in our home. And lastly, does this piece make you want to see more by the same artist/style, so does it keep you interested?

## Practical examples and inspiration

**Activity 1.** Evaluate a piece of art.

The aim of this game is to get students to be able to describe an artwork in the most objective way possible. For this we will give them a picture of the piece they have to describe, and a list of questions they should use to analyse it. They will have to do an extensive online search!

Example:

Ophelia by John Everett Millais, c.1851



Questions:

- When was the painting created?
- Is it abstract or representational?
- What type of painting is it?
- What school or movement does it belong to?
- Where was the picture painted?
- At what point was the artist in his career?
- What materials were used?
- What is the subject of the painting?
- Is it beautiful?

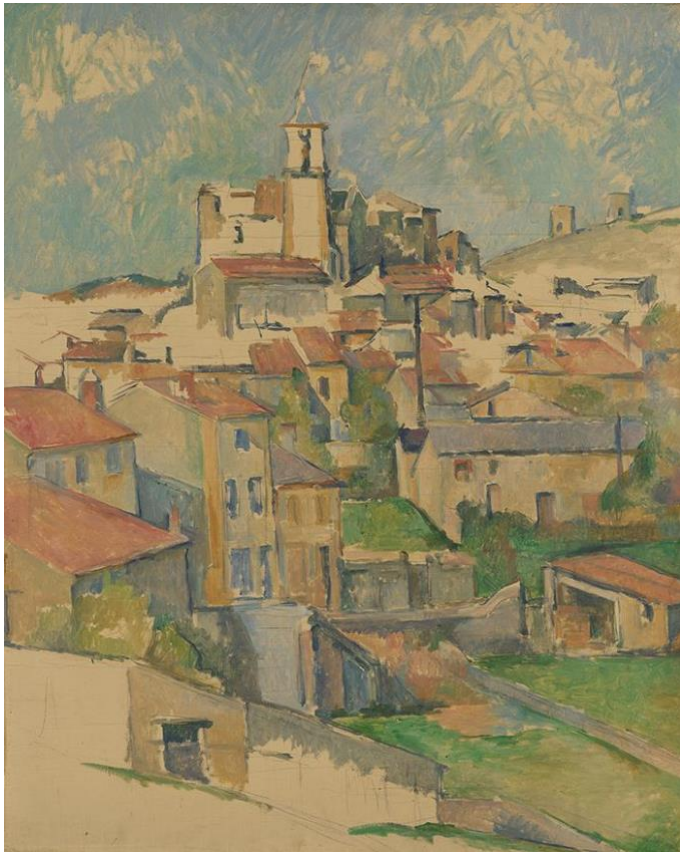
- Proportions
- Are certain shapes or patterns repeated in the painting?
- Do the colours used in the painting complement each other?
- Does the picture draw you in? Does it maintain your attention?
- How does the painting compare with others?
- What is the Painting Trying to Say?
- How Does the Painting Make you Feel?
- Is the Impact of the Painting Mostly Visual, or Mostly Cerebral?
- Would You Like to See it Hanging on a Wall in your house?
- Would you Like to See More Examples of Similar Types of Paintings?

### **Activity 2.** Describing art.

The aim of this game is to get students to familiarize with art vocabulary. Get the students to get in small groups and give them two pictures of an art piece and a list of words. Get them to match the words with the picture.

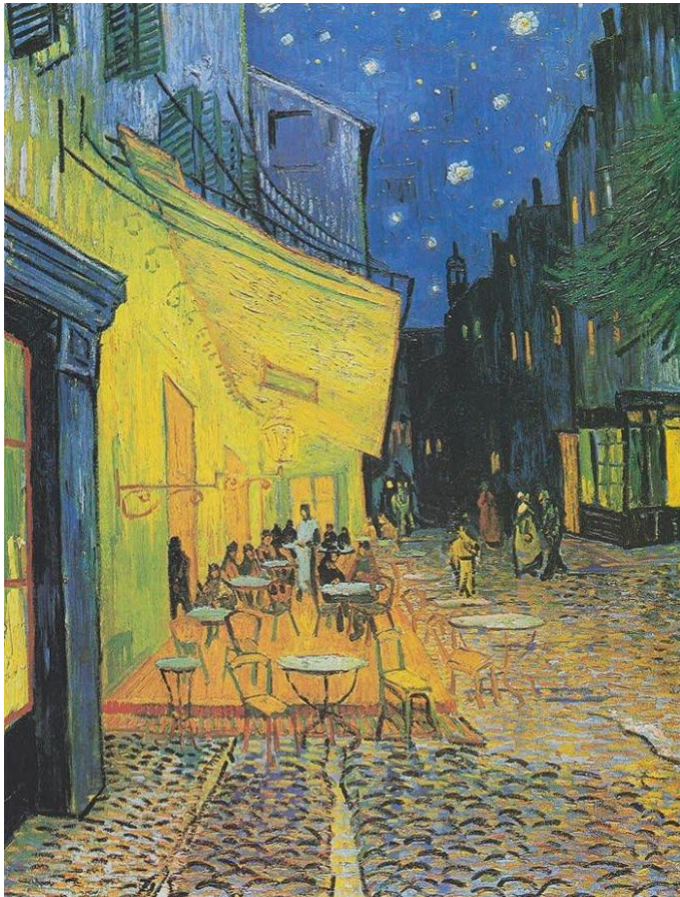
Example:

Gardanne by Paul Cézanne



some words to describe it: unfinished, sketch, geometric theme, orange, green, blue, sharp hue contrast in colours, warm presence.

Café Terrace at Night by Vincent Van Gogh



some words to describe it: striking colors, color gradation, black outlining, blocky brushwork, linear brushwork.

### Additional resources

Draw and Paint Academy – website that provides high-level art education easy to understand : <https://drawpaintacademy.com/about/>

TED-Ed: Who decides what art means? – Hayley Levitt:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoXyw909Qu0>

An awesome drawing/description game to use with a work of art in your classroom by Art Class Curator: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxE-4PSrOGk>





Interactive Painting Game: <http://artsology.com/interactive-painting-game.php>

What's Wrong in this Renaissance Art Painting? Can you find 7 things that are wrong with it or that you think don't belong? Take a good long look at the picture, and when you are ready, check the answers:

<http://artsology.com/renaissance-art-whats-wrong-game.php>

