

How to Read a Painting



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Welcome to this learning resource

This has been designed for Key Stages 3 and 4.

This is part of a series of resources designed to be used in your classroom or as a virtual resource for home learning.

Each resource provides a set of learning materials to invite your students to critically examine (*Close Encounter*), think and discuss ideas (*Discuss*), develop their own artwork through artist-led virtual workshops or ideas (*Create*), and conclude with an opportunity to reflect and evaluate their work (*Reflect*). There are hyperlinks for students to research in greater depth.

This session is designed to meet these learning objectives:

- Sustained investigation of an artwork. Understanding composition, perspective, symbolism and artist narratives.
- Learning technical language and communicating appropriate responses.
- Reflecting on reasoned understandings of cultural context and historical timeframes, and cultural, moral, spiritual context.
- Reflecting on how this artwork inspires students' own artwork.

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Key artwork

Salvator Rosa, 1615-1673

'L'Umana Fragilita (Human Frailty)', c.1656

Oil on canvas

PD.53-1958

In 1655 a devastating plague swept Naples. Salvator Rosa's son, Rosalvo, his brother, his sister, her husband and five of their children, all died. The transience of human life was a recurring theme in 17th-century painting and thought, but for Rosa, in the year he made this painting, the subject had a tragic immediacy. A letter to his friend Ricciardi makes clear the effect this multiple bereavement had upon him:

"This time heaven has struck me in such a way that shows me that all human remedies are useless and the least pain I feel is when I tell you that I weep as I write."

References to antiquity, colours and palettes, symbols and composition.

You might like to use this resource alongside the How to Read a Painting video on the Fitzwilliam Museum schools website.



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Close encounter

Let's start by thinking about the physical size of this painting: height 199.1cm x width 133.1cm.

Your first challenge is to find something this size in your classroom or at home! You'll need a long tape measure...

This painting is almost exactly the same size as a double bed, wardrobe or large cupboard.

Imagine or act out the pose in the same position as the woman or skeleton in this painting. You can use friends to help you – this can help you work out the scale. It might help if you take a 'selfie' when you are in position. When a painting of this size includes people, we can think about scale – if they are life-size, smaller or larger?

Now measure a wall in your own classroom or home. Imagine the size of the room that a painting this size could hang in – what sort of house might have rooms that size? What does that tell us about where this painting might originally have been displayed and the status of the owners?

Discuss

Ask the artist

In a pair, one of you is an art journalist; the other is Salvator Rosa. Devise a set of questions to find out more about the painting. (See fact sheet: https://fitz-cms-images.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/fs_s_rosa_human_frailty.pdf.)

Here's a question to get you started: "Signor Salvator, tell us, who is that mysterious lady and why is she so sad?"

How do you think the artist, Salvator Rosa, would answer?

Find it, list it

As a class make a list of as many actual 'things' you can find in the painting. Aim to list around 15 'things'. We'll start you off: a bubble.

Look very closely into the **background** of the painting. Did you find a fish? An old man's face? A hippo?

Turn your attention to the **foreground**, the 'front' of the painting. Did you find a knife? A bubble? A spent firework?

Why do you think the artist, Salvator Rosa, included these in his painting? These act as a code called **symbolism** – when an object stands for something else. Can you decode the symbols?

Fish: think about what an old dead fish might smell like.

Face of an old man: he is the Roman god Terminus, the god of endings.

Hippo: often a dangerous and unpredictable animal.

Bubbles and fireworks: how long does a firework illuminate the sky? How many seconds does a bubble float in the air? Can you capture these and keep them?

Knife: which way is the blade facing? What could this knife symbolically cut apart?

Owl: the companion animal to the ancient Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva.

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Create

Colours and Symbols

Create a set of symbols to represent: chaos, everlasting, impermanence, love, hope, life.

Put together your own paint palette that matches this painting. You can mix colours together to create a range of tones and hues. Discover how to paint using a limited palette in this video with artist Nathan Huxtable: <https://youtu.be/-ss6ngKRDzY>.

Experiment with matching your colours and symbols

Reflect

Make a set of notes that reflect on the following:

What is your initial emotional response to this painting? Then, think about whether your understanding of the artist's personal story changed your emotional response. Do artworks always require an emotional response?

How does understanding the symbols help us understand the story of this painting more deeply? How does the artist use colour to heighten the visual emotive response to the image?

Which ancient historical era does the artist refer to and how does this relate to his own culture? Then, reflect on how this might influence our contemporary understanding.

Which aspects of this painting might inspire and inform your own artworks and how can you expand these?

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