

Ways of Looking

A Personal Approach – what do I bring?

All responses to works of art are conditioned by our different personal and social experiences. These cannot be ignored and should be our starting point when thinking about an artwork.

yourself your world your experience

yourself	What are your first reactions to the work? Why does it make you feel or think like that? There are fundamental differences between us that condition the way we see things. Gender, race, class and age will all determine the way we look at and understand art, as will our attitudes, values and beliefs.
your world	What does the work remind you of? Why does it remind you of that? The world we live in, and the things we surround ourselves with, will frame the way we see things. For example, our country or region of origin, family, homes and environments affect our interpretation.
your experience	What can you connect the work to? We all bring different experiences and interests to the Gallery. For example, things we have seen on television or at the cinema; places we have visited; things that have happened to us. This diversity of experience means that we may react to art in the Gallery in different ways.

Looking at the Subject – what is it about?

Each artwork can be looked at in terms of what it is telling us, be it through its content, its title or the type of work it is. In some cases the subject of the work will reside in its form (as in very abstract work).

content message title theme type/genre

content	What is the work? What is it about? What is happening?
message	What does the work represent? Moving beyond a straight description of what you see, try to speculate on what the work might stand for. Are there any symbols you recognise?
title	What does the artist call it? Does this change the way we see the work?
theme	What is the theme of the work?
type/genre	How does the work relate to the traditional genres of History painting, the Nude, Landscape or Still Life painting?

Looking at the Object – what can I see?

Every work of art, whether a painting, sculpture, video or photograph has its own intrinsic qualities. These will inform our reading of it. To understand these qualities we need to look at the artwork formally, for example in terms of line, tone, colour, space, and mass. Equally, looking at physical properties such as materials and processes will deepen our understanding of the object. Modern art materials allow for an unlimited array of colours, textures and quality of paint. Artists have moved on from the time when pigments dictated the colours they could use. Sculptural materials and techniques have expanded in a similar way. At the beginning of the twentieth century, artists such as Marcel Duchamp presented common, everyday objects in the gallery as works of art. The freedom artists now have over materials has turned modern art on its head. Contemporary art can be made from almost anything – film and video, found objects, food, or furniture – materials whose histories and associations affect our understanding of the work.

colour shapes marks surface
scale space materials process composition

colour	What colours does the artist use? Why do you think s/he used these colours? How are they organised? What effects do they create?
shapes	What kind of shapes can you find in the painting or sculpture? Are they curved, straight, sharp or pointed? What effects do they create?
marks	What kind of marks does the artist use? What effect do they have?
surface	What is the surface like? What kind of textures can you see? What effects do they create?
scale	How big is the work? Why is it this size? Would its meaning change if it was bigger or smaller?
space	What sense or illusion of space or depth do you find in the work? Or is there none? Do some artists want us to realise that a painting is only paint on a flat canvas?
materials	What materials is the work made of? Are they traditional art materials or 'found' materials? How would your response to the work change if the artist used a different material? What associations or connotations do the materials carry?
process	How has the work been made? Has the artist made it or has it been fabricated? What kind of skills were involved? What changes might have occurred to the piece while it was being made? How visible or invisible is the process of its making? If it is an installation, how has it been assembled? If it is a video piece, how was it filmed and how is it projected?
composition	How is the work organised or put together?

Looking at the Context – relating the work in the Gallery to the wider world

Investigating when, where and by whom a work was made can reveal more about it. To read the work simply in terms of the artist's biography, or by an assumption of what the artist's intentions were, is not the only way of looking at a work of art. Researching the context within which the work was produced (for example the political climate, social history and culture of the time) will tell us more. Equally the present day context may give us a different reading. The positioning in the Gallery and the information presented with it can reveal another story. Seeing the work within a broader visual culture can also generate new and even contradictory meanings for the paintings and sculptures.

when where who history other arts
other fields of knowledge the present the hang interpretation the environment

when	When was the work made? Can we make any connections between the work and the period in which it was made?
where	Where was it made? Does the work tell us anything about the place in which it was made?
who	Who made it? What do we know about the artist? Who was it made for?
history	Can you relate it to the social and political history of the time?
other arts	Can you link it to the arts of the period, for example film, music, literature, or design?
other fields of knowledge	How does the work relate to other areas of knowledge, for example science, geography, mathematics, or ecology?
the present	How do people view the work today? Is it the same or different from how it might have originally been seen?
the hang	How much space is around the work? Which other works are next to or near to the piece? Do they look similar or completely different? Are there any visual or thematic connections between these works? Is it a monographic display?
interpretation	What kind of information is there to support the work, for example labels, extended captions, wall texts? How does this information affect your experience of the work? Would you still feel the same if you did not have any information?
the environment	What size is the room? How does this affect your experience of the work? How much room do you think works of art need? Think about scale as well as size. What colour are the walls? Does this affect the environment? What kind of lighting is used? Would the work look different in another setting, for example in a studio, or outdoors?