

Looking At Paintings

Used and adapted from "Annotated Art" by Robert Cumming

Six Guidelines

Subject Paintings may have specific subjects, each with a meaningful message to deliver. Often, the subject is quite easy to recognize. However, in many early Western works, artists have selected Bible stories of the gods of antiquity as told in Greek and Roman mythology. When creating these works, the artists could assume that their audience was familiar with these stories. This is now no longer true, but rediscovering these great myths and legends can be one of the major pleasures of looking at paintings.

Technique Every painting must be physically created and an understanding of the skills employed, perhaps a handling of oil paint or use of fresco techniques, adds greatly to our appreciation of a work of art.

Symbolism Many works use an extensive language of symbolism and allegory that was understood by artists and their audiences. Recognizable objects, however finely painted, can represent not just themselves but concepts of a much deeper or more abstract meaning. Familiarity with this language has greatly diminished, but it can be relearned or rediscovered through a study of the paintings and the beliefs of the society that nurtured the artist.

Space and Light Artists seeking to recreate a convincing representation of the world on the flat surface of a panel or canvas need to acquire a mastery of the illusion of space and light. The variety of ways in which this illusion can be created is remarkable. In many cases a painting's main visual delight lies in the way the painter has worked with these two elusive qualities.

Historical Style Every historical period develops a recognizable style that can be traced in the works of its leading artists. The styles do not exist in isolation but are reflected in all the arts.

Personal Interpretation Anyone who embarks upon the journey to explore the meanings of paintings will soon become bewildered by the amount of points of view that are offered. A simple guideline is this: If you can see it, believe it - no matter what anyone else says. If you cannot see it, do not believe it. Everyone has the right to bring to a work of art whatever he or she chooses by way of seeing and experience, and to come away with whatever he or she chooses on a personal level. Knowledge of art history, symbolism, and technical skills should broaden the experience. But if the personal (or "spiritual") dimension is lost, then looking at a work of art becomes no more significant than looking at, and trying to solve a crossword puzzle.