

Analysing Paintings – a checklist

Colour

- Where do the colours you see sit on the colour wheel? Are those colours complementary (has the artist used simultaneous contrast) or analogous? Do the contrasts or ‘harmonies’ you find reflect or affect the subject matter?
- Has the artist used a wide range of colours? Or does the work use a more restricted set of colours?
- Is there any use of ‘perceptual colour’? (most often found in Impressionism)
- Do you notice the hue, value and intensity of the colour? What effects do these have on the painting as a whole?
- How has the artist handled line? Are the contours of the objects emphasised or hidden? What effect does this produce?

Space and Perspective

- Has the artist employed linear, aerial or multiple viewpoint perspective, or a combination of these? Why?
- Is there a distinct vanishing point?
- At what level is the spectator’s viewpoint?
- Can you spot the orthogonals running through the painting?
- Is there a distinct foreground, middleground and background?
- Do figures and objects overlap?
- Does the size of objects change according to where they are placed in the painting?
- Is there evidence of foreshortening?
- Is the image cropped or framed?
- How does the light and tone create space?

Modelling and Plasticity

- How has the artist depicted the plasticity of the object?
- Does the modelling use white or down-modelling? (Depending on the period in which the painting was painted, you might consider whether they are using Cennini-style modelling, or Alberti-style modelling.
- Has the artist used cangiamento?
- Is there a conspicuous absence of modelling?

Composition

- What are the dominant lines in the painting?
- What are the force lines evident or suggested in the painting?
- Is the composition open or closed? What effect does this have?
- Is the composition symmetrical or asymmetrical? What effects does this have?
- In what ways is the composition guiding our eye around the painting? Does it create a strong rhythm, or is it more stable?

Medium and Support

- Which medium has been used?
- How has the artist used the materials? How has he or she handled the medium?
- Does the artwork appear finished or unfinished? Are there parts of the support which remain exposed?
- Is the brushwork 'tight' or 'broad and fluid'?
- Is the artwork highly finished, smooth and hard-edged ('painterly'), or is it rough and textured?

Light

- Where is the light source and in which direction is it falling?
- Are the contrasts strong or weak?
- How has the artist's use of light and shade affect the mood of the painting?
- Is there just one light source, or are there several?
- If it is a narrative painting, how does the depiction of light affect our reading of the painting's narrative?
- In what ways does the manipulation of light relate to the composition of the painting?