

# Teaching Art Appreciation at the Fine Arts Museum

Peter Mayo

Since its official opening on the 7th May 1974, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta has been regarded as one of the best sources of cultural enrichment on the island. Its contribution to the education of adults and youngsters, especially those interested in the representational arts, should indeed be considerable and local art masters in the secondary schools and higher institutions may fully avail themselves of such a source.

The Museum affords the art master the opportunity of drawing on excellent local examples in order to supplement his lessons in the History of Art. The Museum's spacious rooms lend themselves to 'on-the-spot' lessons which, needless to say, demand preparation. There are different ways and means by which the teacher may organise his teaching points. The method I propose is that of grouping these points under the following headings:

- (a) Technique (medium and material used)
- (b) Representation (*What* the work represents)
- (c) Expression (*How* the particular figure or scene is represented)
- (d) Form (Composition and colour)<sup>1</sup>

This method of classification, suggested by Eric Newton in *European Painting and Sculpture*, is rather arbitrary and may be refuted by the reader. However, I consider it quite convenient for the purpose of organising one's teaching strategy.

By the term 'Expression', I mean what is generally referred to as the 'artist's mind's eye', that is to say, the manner in which the figure or scene is conceived by the artist in question — his personal vision.

An inductive approach is advocated throughout, i.e. one whereby the teacher elicits information rather than divulges it. This is very much a personal view based on the conviction that no matter how uninformed the viewer may be, he has an eye and taste which can, with training in observation, be keen enough to appreciate the work in question.

The following lesson plan, relating to the section on Dutch Art, may serve as a guideline to the teacher. Apart from listing relevant teaching points, I have included a few examples of the kind of questions that may be asked in the course of the

discussion. The reader will note that I have included, among the teaching points, the most important landmarks of the age. I have also provided a few biographical notes where famous painters are concerned. These points should constitute a brief introduction to the lesson and this should be one of very few instances where the information is to be divulged.

For reasons of space, I shall be confining myself to just two paintings but the approach adopted may easily be applied to other works at the Museum.<sup>2</sup> The first painting is a portrait in oils by William Key (1515—1568) while the second is a landscape, also in oils, by David Teniers (1610—1690).

## Lesson Plan Model

### *Dutch Painting*

*Remote Preparation by Teacher: Age* — (a) *Pre-Reformation* or period under Spanish domination: Dutch art reflected aristocratic life; personalities include *Van Scorel* and *Sir Antonio Moro*; (b) *Counter-Reformation* or period following Dutch independence: Dutch art reflected life of the ruling bourgeoisie, i.e. merchant and commercial classes; personalities include *Hals*, *Rembrandt*, *Vermeer* and *Van Ruisdael*.

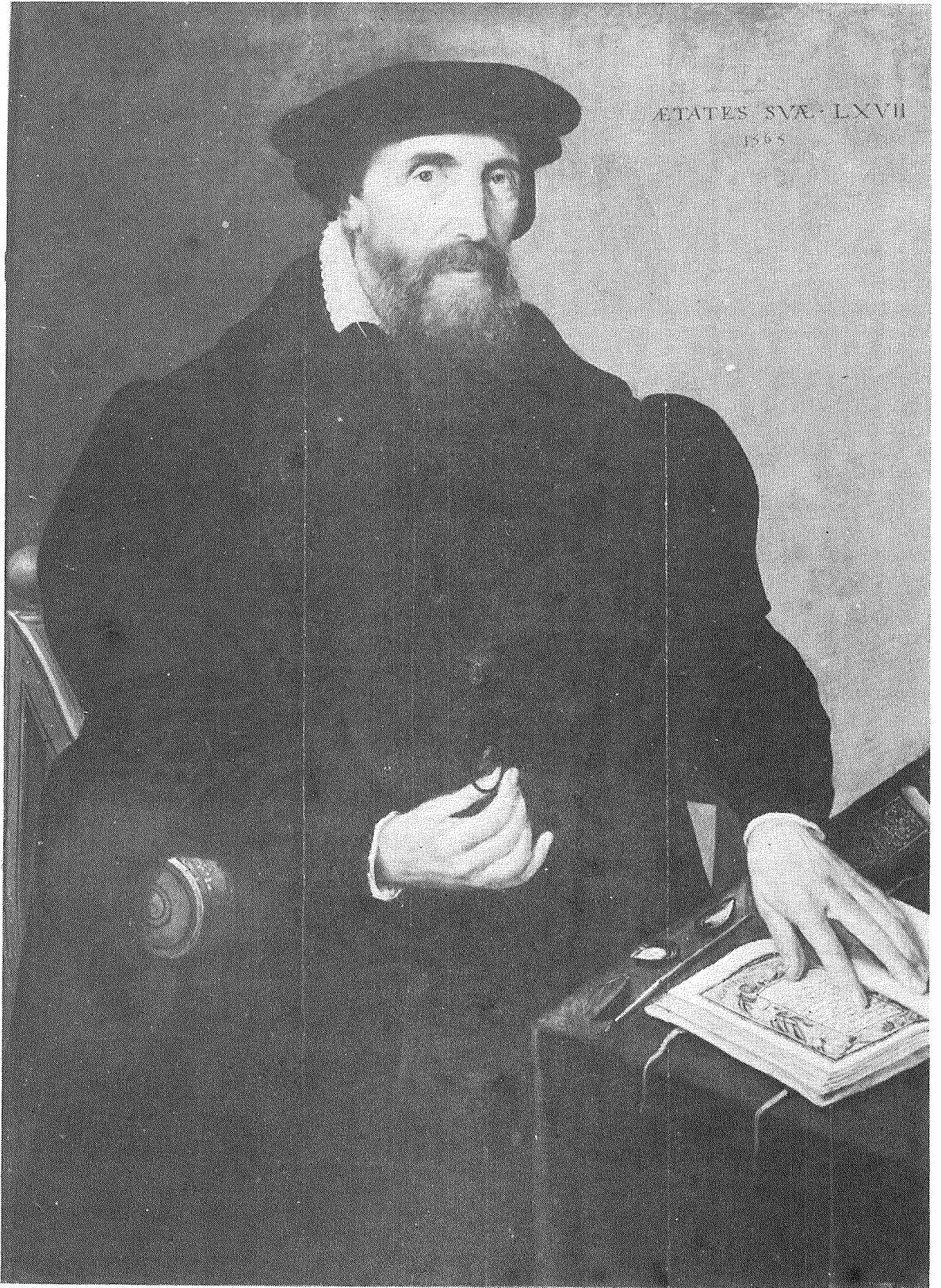
### 1. **An Illuminator of Books** *William Key*

#### **Technique**

- (a) *Material*: wood (panel)
- (b) *Medium*: "The Netherlands had, until the end of the sixteenth century formed part of Flanders and so it is most natural that the Dutch should have adopted oils as a medium of paint. Can anyone tell me why?" — Because the Flemish painters were the first to adopt the oils technique.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Representation**

- (i) "How would you refer to this painting?" — As a *portrait*. "What is a portrait?" — A representation of a person or group of persons. "One may add that the *sitter* must be fully conscious of the fact that he is being portrayed. In most cases, it is the sitter himself who *commissions* the work."
- (ii) "Is the figure portrayed in this work very true to





Landscape with  
figures -  
David Teniers

life?" — Yes, he appears quite natural. "Everything looks *real*. It is a realistic figure (things are presented as they are) and *realism* is commonly regarded as one of the major characteristics of seventeenth century Dutch art."

(iii) "Now, who is being portrayed in this work?" — An illuminator of books. "Which articles in this painting tell us about his profession?" — Spectacles, shells and the beautifully adorned book. "His job was to illuminate books — a common practice throughout Europe at the time. Books were not only admired for their content but also for their *presentation*. "Is this the figure of a nobleman?" — No, a craftsman. "Merchants and craftsmen feature prominently in Dutch works, especially those carried out after the revolution, i.e. after the Dutch rose successfully against their Spanish rulers. Before the revolution, Dutch art was very *aristocratic*. Following independence, it began to reflect middle-class life (merchants, craftsmen, traders, etc) — the class responsible for ruling the country."

### Expression

(a) *Figures*: (i) "Does the painting tell us anything about the sitter's character? How would you describe him?" — Serious-minded, grave-looking. "Very true. This painting succeeds in capturing the serious-mindedness of the Dutch craftsman or 'man about his business' — very much the kind of serious-minded craftsman who was to have a say in the running of his own country."

(ii) Do not overlook the *expressive hands*. This major characteristic of 'three quarter portraiture' was first introduced to painting by *Leonardo da Vinci*.

(b) *Setting*: Does not apply.

(c) *Colour*: "Is this 'serious-mindedness' reflected in the colour of his dress?" — Yes, he wears dark clothes. "The colour of his cloak renders him rather *austere looking*. It wouldn't do to represent a serious-minded person in colourful, richly ornate clothes." (Point out that dark clothes were quite fashionable at the time and betray a strong Spanish influence.) People preferred to appear *serious-minded* rather than *frivolous*."

### Form

(a) *Composition*: Enable the students to observe the perfect balance achieved in this painting:

(i) The *hand* is placed towards the *centre* in line with the face;

(ii) The *book's weight* on the right-hand side is counter-balanced by the *chair's weight* on the left.

(b) *Colour*: (1) Note that the colours are also well-balanced. The *pitch darkness* of the *cloak* is set against a background of *olive green*.

(ii) "Which is the most prominent colour in this painting?" — Black. "Is the figure 'black' from top to bottom?" — There are coloured patches in which a face and a hand are drawn. "What about the colour of the face? Does it contrast with the cloak's pitch darkness?" — It is much lighter. "The darkness shows it to better advantage. How would you describe the face?" — Fresh. "Which colour or colours are employed to capture such freshness?" — A rather brownish colour. "Is it kept constant throughout?" — We have different shades of the same colour. It becomes very *light* around the *eye*. "... a rather luminous patch. These shades or *variations of the same colour* are referred to as *tones* and the face is said to show different *grades* of the same tone. It has excellent *tonal gradations*."

## 2. Landscape with Figures David Teniers

### Biographical Notes:

D. Teniers II (1610—1690) worked in Antwerp and Brussels, excelled at depicting tavern scenes in the style of Van Ostade and Brouwer. He later painted a few 'weird' scenes (witches' sabbath, etc.).

### Technique

(a) *Material*: Canvas

(b) *Medium*: Oils

### Representation:

(i) "What particular scene is represented?" — A country scene — *Dutch landscape*. "Earlier on, we mentioned the *Dutch Uprising in 1580* during

which several gallant Dutchmen lost their life. What does this reveal about the Dutch in relation to their homeland?" — They must have loved it dearly. "Yes, the Dutch must have loved the land for which they fought for several years. This explains their love of landscape."<sup>4</sup> (Refer to their prosperity after the revolution: a life of leisure as suggested by the two gentlemen fishing by the lake).

(ii) "Does this landscape surround or dwarf the figures?" — It dwarfs them. "Is it different from the Renaissance landscape?" — The Renaissance landscape surrounds the figures instead of dwarfing them. (Point out that the figures' small size gives the landscape greater prominence).

### Expression

(a) *Figures*: Does not apply.

(b) *Setting*: "What dominates the landscape?" — Crag. "What do they represent?" — Nature. "So what do they enable the artist to express?" — His admiration for nature. "His fascination for the beautiful forms of nature, their *strength* and *movement*. Do they move?" - No, they don't. "But what about those winding passages across the rocks?" — They suggest movement.

(c) *Colour*: The greyish tones reflect mood. The light 'brownish' tone of the rocks and the figures' bright colours serve to capture the gaiety and splendour of country life.

### Form

(a) *Composition*: (i) The teacher should direct the students' attention towards the lower rock which occupies a *central position* in the work — as if it were a Renaissance figure.

(ii) Moreover, the two men fishing are smaller in size than the ones in the foreground. Such differences in size enable the painter to convey a sense of distance.

(b) *Colour*: Underline the aesthetic value of the crags, i.e. the excellent *tonal gradations* achieved under the play of light. The *tones* become *darker* as the eye shifts towards the left side of the rock.

1. Ref: Newton 1945.
  2. For further lesson plans and a detailed discussion of works at the Museum refer: Mayo, P. — *The National Museum of Fine Arts: A Guide for Teachers*.
  3. The teacher would have already mentioned this point when discussing 16th Century Italian work.
  4. Ref: Shipp 1952.
- Eikemeier, P., 'Dutch Painting' in *Museum: Alte Pinakothek Munchen* (English edition), P. Winter (ed.), Westermann, 1979.
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