

Experiencing works of art in a museum

A visit to the National Museum of Fine Arts

Joseph Paul Cassar

Introduction

Extra curricular activities in our schools have always included visits to various museums. Such visits require planning beforehand. It takes phoning up the museum to inform of the visit, it requires preparatory work in the classroom, explanations at the museum itself and a follow up activity in the class.

The need for an organised package that can assist both teachers and students alike at all levels has long been felt to render museum visits more fruitful. Education in the Arts in Malta is gaining momentum, yet much is still to be desired. The Museums Department has room for special art educators to be permanently assigned to perform the job recommended in this study. Very little material is available to assist our students to benefit from the unique experience of encountering an original work of art. The responsibility remains on the teachers to perform this task to the best of their ability.

The specimen practical worksheet presented here offers an open approach; there is ample room for creativity and the content offers multiple adaptable ways of analysing, experiencing and interpreting works of art. The questions, exercises and discussions are designed to stimulate and develop the visual, mental and psychological well being of our students through the unique experience of standing in front of the work, more or less within the same parameters the original maker stood in producing it.

This exercise is based on works found in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta, Malta. Teachers are encouraged to follow the proposed procedures as well as to adapt, change, create and design their own handouts. A wide variety of approaches are put to use to get the message through. The different techniques applied are flexible enough to be adjusted to the abilities of each individual student. Links can also be made with all the other subjects. It is my wish that this proposal serves as a model to guide educators to work towards creating a more comprehensive art education.

The worksheet specimen is addressed to secondary school students, however it can be easily adapted to other levels as well with wise appropriate modifications. The worksheet is meant to be examined, studied and shared with other subject teachers to provoke discussions, foster thinking procedures and bring forth learning through excitement and involvement in the arts.

Experiencing original works of art in a museum is a special experience. Viewing directly the work of art in a museum setting is a whole different sensation. The physical dimensions, the texture, colour and lighting of the real work leave an impact that a reproduction cannot convey, no matter how good it may be. The proposal here encourages our students to listen to others, investigate art forms, participate in structured discussions, learn how to see and read a picture, as well as write upon seeing art. Imagery has a special role in learning for it helps students to develop skills in the use of language, learn concepts, values and attitudes. Such qualities are highly desirable in fostering aesthetic education and should find a place in the school curriculum.

The Worksheets

Each worksheet is a unit in itself, focussing on a particular painting or sculpture from the National Museum Collection. The teacher or students can pick any work of art to study. Each work of art is illustrated in the beginning of the unit, labelled with the name of the artist, title of the work and relative dates, medium, size and museum room number. All this information is needed to serve as a reference both before visiting the actual work in the museum, and also as a reminder when it comes to conclude and do a follow up in class after the visit. The reproduction serves as an easy available point of reference for the students in class or at home. The exercises which follow are graded, each simple question leads on to the next. The strategy is varied to maintain an element of curiosity, interest and maximum participation. Various checklists are provided to assist the students in understanding the nature of the work and help them towards appreciating art and develop a critical eye. Some questions demand an easy YES or NO answer. The students tick what they feel is right. Other questions demand a simple description of things; others require a list of qualities, while others are geared towards debates. The glossary in the end is to assist the teachers and the students to research more their studies and provide a quick reference section, similar to an art dictionary. The reproductions are not to substitute the actual experience, but to serve ONLY as useful starting points to the planned visit. Their promotion here is justified as a valid educational tool to achieve the desired results of this exercise.

How to go about it

It has been my experience that students and teachers alike will be tempted to jump from one point to another without any specific order when discussing works of art. Such an approach does not enhance a critical discussion. The strategy proposed in this worksheet is not based on a mere description of what catches the eye. There is a series of open-ended questions, inviting interactive talk. The exercises

Students encountering art works at the Fine Arts Museum



JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR
S.Th.Dip, B.A. (Educ.Stds),
B.A. (Rel.Stds), M.A.
(Columbia Pacific University,
California), M.Phil. is an
assistant lecturer with the
Art Department at the Junior
College, and lectures with
the Faculty of Education and
the Art Unit, Faculty of
Architecture, University of
Malta. He specialises in art
education, art history and
criticism. He is the author of
various articles on these
subjects. He is also an
associate member of the
National Society for
Education in Art and Design,
Corsham, Wiltshire, U.K.

start with the obvious in order to build up the students' confidence and curiosity. Students are invited to name things they see in the works of art. It is therefore suggested that a logical procedure will be followed thus:

1. DESCRIBE
2. ANALYSE
3. INTERPRET

1. The descriptive stage

The idea here is a simple one. The students are asked to describe in very precise words what they see in the work of art. In today's world of images, students respond positively to pictures. Get the students talking from what they see. Many times they see things which you might have not realised that they are there!

The information has to be factual and should be something like this: trees, lake, sunlight, rocks, cart, 3 persons...very much like an inventory list. The students will finish with a long list of "things" which are in the picture/sculpture. Make sure that they do not start to express their feelings about the work, discuss technique or what it might mean. No conclusions are meant to be drawn at this stage.

Terms such as "Landscape", "Portrait", "Interior", "Romantic", "Pastoral", can be mentioned. If such comments arise, check them in the glossary.

2. The analyses stage

Now, the students can analyse and "dissect" as it were, the work of art into parts, studying each detail and its expressive qualities and relating it to the whole.

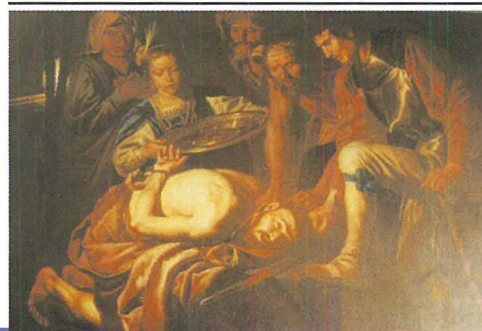
It is at this stage that the students are guided to look for **basic elements in a picture**, such as **shapes, colour, texture, composition, painting technique**. These sensory and formal qualities should be discussed and reasons or explanations should be given for all observations. This exercise should also serve as an opportunity to develop and learn new vocabulary.

An effective question to ask students in helping them analyse a picture is:

WHERE ARE YOU - THE VIEWER - STANDING IN RELATION TO THIS PICTURE?

OR

IF YOU COULD ACTUALLY ENTER THE PAINTING WHERE IS IT LIKELY THAT YOU GO?



In this way the student identifies the nature of elements such as shapes (square-round), lines (thick-thin), values (dark-light), textures (coarse-smooth), colours (bright-dull), size (large-small), space (deep-shallow).

3. The interpretative stage

This is an attempt to decipher meaning from the evidence collected in stages 1 & 2. After describing and analysing all the information, the student is then asked to put this knowledge into a historical context and see its implications.

The various images listed in the Descriptive Stage evoke responses from one's storehouse of images.

Now, these can be translated into:

MOOD LANGUAGE: nuances of feeling describable in terms such as harsh, pleasing...

DYNAMIC STATES: arousing a sense of tension, conflict, and relaxation...

IDEA & IDEAL LANGUAGE: interpretations of social or psychological events and beliefs, expressions of courage, wisdom...

Students should be helped to realise that some information in works of art is not always very apparent. This is the time when they should be told about it.

Specimen Worksheet

The National Museum of Fine Arts has in its collection four of Stomer's outstanding paintings. This Dutch artist moved to Italy and worked mainly in Naples and Sicily. The *Caravaggesque* features are strong in these paintings, accentuated with an extra dose of drama in the subjects depicting a dead Abel, "The Death of Cato", the assault on a traveller and the "Beheading of St. John". The composition of the latter focuses on the head of the Baptist and the remaining figures gather around in a semi-circle,

Worksheet

"Beheading of St. John" by Matthias Stomer

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1. What is the story depicted in this painting?
2. a) Following the numbers in the ink drawing provided identify the figures in the painting:



1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.		6.	

- b) Describe how your eye moves through the scene. Give reasons for your answer. Identify your starting point and ending.
3. a) How would you describe the composition in this painting?
- b) Compare this dramatic painting with Stomer's gruesome scene of the "Death of Cato" in Room 9 in the Museum's Collection.
- c) Indicate the focal point in both paintings.

- d) Identify the source of light.
- e) Where is the scene taking place?

4. This painting is:

Surrealistic	<input type="checkbox"/>
Realistic	<input type="checkbox"/>
Impressionistic	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Put an "X" in the space next to the word that best describes your ideas about this painting. Add any other words you think correspond to your general feeling concerning this work:

happy	<input type="checkbox"/>	intense	<input type="checkbox"/>	violent	<input type="checkbox"/>	bright	<input type="checkbox"/>
fearsome	<input type="checkbox"/>	tense	<input type="checkbox"/>	bloody	<input type="checkbox"/>	crowded	<input type="checkbox"/>
gruesome	<input type="checkbox"/>	impressive	<input type="checkbox"/>	cosy	<input type="checkbox"/>	dark	<input type="checkbox"/>
forceful	<input type="checkbox"/>	brutal	<input type="checkbox"/>	dramatic	<input type="checkbox"/>	emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>
sad	<input type="checkbox"/>	tight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Focus on the young girl:

- a) Describe the angle she is holding the salver.
- b) How would you describe the expression on her face?
- c) What material is the platter made of?
- d) Describe her dress and jewellery.
7. Name the artist who was the pioneer in exploiting such drama by contrasting light and shade to render a powerful realism beyond compare?
8. This painting is rich in tonal values. What is the dominant colour scheme that is modelling this painting?
9. Focus on the eyes of the Baptist, his tied up hands, the woman's hands in the background, and the armoured soldier in the foreground holding the Baptist's hair. Describe the psychological impact of all of these details.
10. Identify the difference between this painting and that of Andrea Vicaro's (1598-1670) "Beheading of St. John" in Room 8.

Matthias STOMER
(1600-c.1650)
"Beheading of St. John"
Oils on canvas
144x194cms
Museum Room 9

almost hidden by the woman enlightens the scene, striking hard on the armour of a soldier, on the platter, Salome's dress and St. John's right shoulder and back. The Baptist's severed head gazes at us, as we look on (like the figures in the painting), participating in the killing. This painting is very rich in its *chromatic values*, the play of light, the modelling, the organisation of space, *realism* and colours.

GLOSSARY

(related to this worksheet)

“Viewing directly the work of art in a museum setting is a whole different sensation. The physical dimensions, the texture, colour and lighting of the real work leave an impact that a reproduction cannot convey, no matter how good it may be



Caravaggio referring to Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi (1571-1610) famous for painting sensational, innovative, dramatic, large religious pictures. His use of CHIAROSCURO renders his paintings so effective and life-like.

Caravaggesque works that are painted in the idiom established by CARAVAGGIO.

Chiaroscuro Italian word meaning “light” (chiaro) and “dark” (scuro). It refers to the play and contrast of light and dark areas in painting, which was initiated by Leonardo Vinci. Later on CARAVAGGIO and Rembrandt were to develop an art based on these characteristics.

Chromatic values refer to the degree of tone vividness in a colour.

Composition refers to the arrangement of various elements in a painting or sculpture that forms a coherent whole.

Contrast a difference which is clearly seen once things are put together; comparing two opposite things for example light and dark areas.

Depth the degree of recession in a picture; generally referred to as PERSPECTIVE.

Dramatic exciting, vivid, striking in appearance or effect; impressive and theatrical.

Expression the act itself of representing subject matter in art through a medium; feeling and meaning given to the work of art generally manifested as DRAMA.

Focus the position where things or people are placed for clarity of perception.

Foreshortening TECHNIQUE depicting objects lying at an angle to the picture plane by means of PERSPECTIVE. The illusion created is one of depth. It is our eye, which reconstructs the correct proportions and understanding of what is represented.

Form the structural qualities of a work of art such as shapes and volumes and their relationship.

Highlight the lightest area in a painting; the spot, which is receiving most light; a strong light that, hits an area in a painting to attract our attention.

Illusion pictorial device such as PERSPECTIVE and FORESHORTENING to make things look real; representation of 3-dimensional space on a flat 2-dimensional surface giving the impression of an extension in real space.

Masterpiece a test-piece by which an apprentice showed that he qualified to be a master of his craft. Later on this came to refer to a work of art of outstanding merit in the course of the history of art.

Oil painting a TECHNIQUE produced by the use of PIGMENT with drying fine oils, generally linseed oil. This medium of painting allowed the artists to produce different gradations of TONE. This medium can also produce surface TEXTURE depending on the application of IMPASTO and BRUSHWORK.

Perspective method of representing 3-dimensional objects, their volume and space on a flat surface. The system is based on the principal that objects in the distance appear smaller than those, which are closer to the viewer.

Proportion harmonious or symmetrical; the ratio of different parts in a work of art.

Psychological refers to a work of art, which emphasizes the character, mental state and behaviour of the SITTER.

Realism an artform which aims at reproducing reality in its accuracy and details.

Style the common characteristics in the arts of a given period. It can refer also to a distinctive manner of painting by an artist.

Tactile value refers to the artist's attempts to represent the weight and TEXTURE of objects by means of colour and line. Visual qualities, characteristics and appearance of the depicted objects.

Technique French word for “technical”. Methods used by an artist to accomplish his aims; mastery of a body of knowledge pertaining to the artist's craft.

Texture the nature of the surface of a painting or sculpture. It can also refer to the free handling of brush strokes, which create a rough surface on the canvas.

Tonal values the relation of light and dark areas in a painting irrespective of colour.

Volume the space occupied by the human figure or object within a painting; it is used to refer to the solidity of the painted object in its REALISTIC representation.

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Andrea Vivaro “Beheading of St. John”

