

Analysing and interpreting an artwork



Yinka Shonibare, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*



Kehinde Wiley, *Ship of Fools*

Using an artwork or a painting as a stimulus can open a window onto another world. Artworks can transport us into another time that might be very different to our own, and yet equally might address themes that are prevalent today. We encounter historical art in a different era to the one it was created in and this can affect how we see it. The subject of a historical portrait, for example, would often include objects that were important to them. These objects can help us imagine what figures were like. Artworks can be packed with symbolism, and carefully constructed to inspire awe and wonder. All artworks are open to interpretation and they can be shaped by our experience, memories, knowledge and our prejudices.

Artists are curious. They look at things differently. Art is a powerful platform to communicate, challenge and explore ideas, raise awareness, and to provoke and offer multiple perspectives. Artists can play a role in positive change and use their art as a platform to communicate ideas to alter the way we see things about our identity and the world in which we live.

In order for young people to make twenty-first century connections and have meaningful encounters with artworks, they need to understand how to look and interpret to reflect critically. Being able to engage with the ideas of artists is as important as learning their skills. Encouraging students to read images and unlock meaning will stimulate curiosity and ownership of ideas to feed into their own artistic responses.

Here is a list of questions to provoke debate, spark discussions and prompt artistic and dramatic responses.

Looking:

- What medium and materials is it made from?
- What techniques and processes were used?
- Describe the formal elements, such as tone, line, colour, textures, space, shape and patterns.
- Does the artwork fall within a particular genre?
- Is this typical of the work the artist is known for?
- Is it framed, or part of a diptych or triptych?
- What is the scale and vantage point of the artwork?

Interpreting:

- How do your eyes move around the composition?
- Write down the words that come to mind.
- What immediately jumps out? Look at the bottom, top, foreground and background.
- What's the most important thing in the artwork? How has it been presented, i.e. realistic, exaggerated or abstracted?
- What themes stand out the most to you and why?
- Are there themes within the artwork that are relevant to you and the present day?
- Does it remind you of anything? Another artwork, perhaps?
- What's the mood, feeling or atmosphere?
- What is happening? Where is it? How can you tell?
- Are there characters, and if so, what are their gestures and what is their relationship to each other?
- What is their age, profession, wealth? How do you know?
- Do they make direct eye contact with the viewer? If so, what are they saying?
- Does the artwork communicate a narrative, and is it fact or fiction?
- Has the arrangement or composition been contrived or embellished?
- Is it static or is movement portrayed? If so, how?
- Do objects, props or images have symbolic value? If so, what do they represent?
- When was it made? What was happening in the world at the time the artwork was made and how might that have influenced the work?
- Is your initial response different to the professional interpretation and label provided?
- Was the artwork commissioned? Who was the intended audience for when it was made?

Thinking:

- Do you like it?
- Does it resonate with you?

- How does it make you feel?
- Does the title or where the artwork is displayed change the way you look and think about it?
- Do you have a connection with it? Does it make you think about something from the present day or your past?
- What can we learn about ourselves by contemplating it?
- Does your personal history, gender, beliefs or background inform how you read the work?
- What biases and assumptions did you make reading the work?
- Have you been persuaded by what other people think of the work and did this enhance your connection with it?
- What else do you need to know to develop a better understanding?

Questioning:

- If you were to put yourself in the artwork, what is it like, what can you taste, touch, smell or see?
- How do the characters feel physically and emotionally? What could the relationship between these people be?
- How could you reverse and/or change the historical narrative?
- What could happen five minutes, one hour and/or one day later?
- If objects, props or people could speak, what would they say and why?
- Give the artwork a headline from a newspaper. How does it change the narrative?
- Write your own gallery or museum label for the artwork.
- Is there a hidden character or animal that you would like to bring to the forefront, which isn't prominent in the work?
- What is the viewpoint of the artwork? Who owned it? How did they acquire it? Did the painting go on a journey?
- Think like an expert. Take on a 'mantle of the expert' role, such as a police officer, curator, journalist, inventor and/or news presenter.
- Where would you like to see the artwork exhibited and why? For example, on the street, in a shopping centre.
- If you have a digital or printed version of it, place it near another artwork. Does it change the meaning, or raise questions? Do new ideas emerge?

Responding (art):

- Build on the objective of the artist, their theme or message.
- Express the dynamics, such as atmosphere, weight, light, shadow, space or colour.
- Create your own costume from everyday materials.
- Reproduce the painting – not itself, but how the piece made you feel.
- Use the theme(s) as a starting point.

- Find objects in your learning environment to make a still life.
- Think about which objects you would include in a self-portrait and why.
- Divide the painting into a grid and recreate each section using different styles.
- Select a section of the artwork to create a motif for a wallpaper and/or fabric design.
- Choose another artist you like and consider how they would reinterpret the artwork.
- Photograph, draw or make rubbings of similar textures and colours around the learning environment that feature in the artwork.
- Appropriate, borrow, alter and adopt to unlock new meanings and interpretations.

Responding (drama):

- Take inspiration from the composition for staging, blocking, tone and colour.
- Hotseat a character from the painting to establish a backstory or find emotions to start plot ideas.
- Write monologues and duologues for characters you have created or tell the story from one viewpoint – give them an age and a personality. How do they move?
- Devise a short scene. Make changes to the story, embellish it, and change the ending if you know the narrative of the painting.
- Compose diary entries from one of the character or objects to inspire a narrative.
- Create a series of freeze frames to inspire ideas for storylines or ideas for movement – how do you enter a freeze frame and how do you move out of it?
- Adopt marks and lines as floor patterns for movements or rhythms for movement.
- Improvise some quick-fire scenes.
- Utilise transitions between scenes to influence the pace and rhythm.
- Restrict your space, like a zoom box, or explode your space.
- Experiment with the dynamics of movement in a static painting.
- Initiate a soundscape.
- Inject comedy into a scene to play against the natural tension.
- Play with objects and props that feature in the artwork, or replace them for other things, and find/make costumes to wear.
- Take the story and bring it into another era or present day or into an imagined place.
- Think about the connection with the audience. What do you want your audience to think and feel? What message are you trying to give?
- What genre will you use and why? For example, epic, comedy, melodrama, physical theatre, T.I.E?



The Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I