

Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Art Centre
VOLUNTEER GUIDE TRAINING PROGRAM
Lecture notes

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Lecture 1: Myths and half-truths about art and guiding

Myths and half-truths about art

“Art is about the real world.”

“Art is personal expression”

“Art is...” (etc.)

Each true, but not the *whole* truth. (Subject of lecture 2)

“It’s all subjective, isn’t it?” Or ... “There’s no such thing as good or bad art.”

“IDKMAA-BIKWIL” (I Don’t Know Much About Art – But I Know What I Like)

“There are no bad reasons for liking a painting; there are [only] bad reasons for not liking a painting.” - EH Gombrich, *The Story of Art*

“Art should be beautiful.”

It depends on what you mean by “beautiful”. E.g. is Goya’s *The third of May* “beautiful”?

“Art should be skilful.”

Maybe, but is technical skill enough? E.g. bit.ly/jolie-vermeer

“Monetary value is (or should be) a reflection of artistic value.”

\$ value = demand/supply ... nothing else!

Myths and half-truths about guiding

“Art is not for everyone.” Or ... “I’m not artistic.”

Do you have to be able to play violin to appreciate violin music? No.

“The artist is the only real expert.”

Once artwork leaves studio, it belongs to the world. E.g. Jeffrey Smart

“To properly appreciate art you have to know its historical context.”

Context can sometimes take you *away* from appreciating the artwork.

“If possible, start with earliest and progress to the most recent.”

You can harness the emotional energy (i.e. outrage) generated by more recent art by presenting it first and then working backwards through time.

Lecture 2: What is art?

First, we should distinguish between **intrinsic and extrinsic aims**.

Extrinsic aims: those that could be just as valid for *non-artistic* matters.

So what are the **intrinsic reasons** for artists to create art?

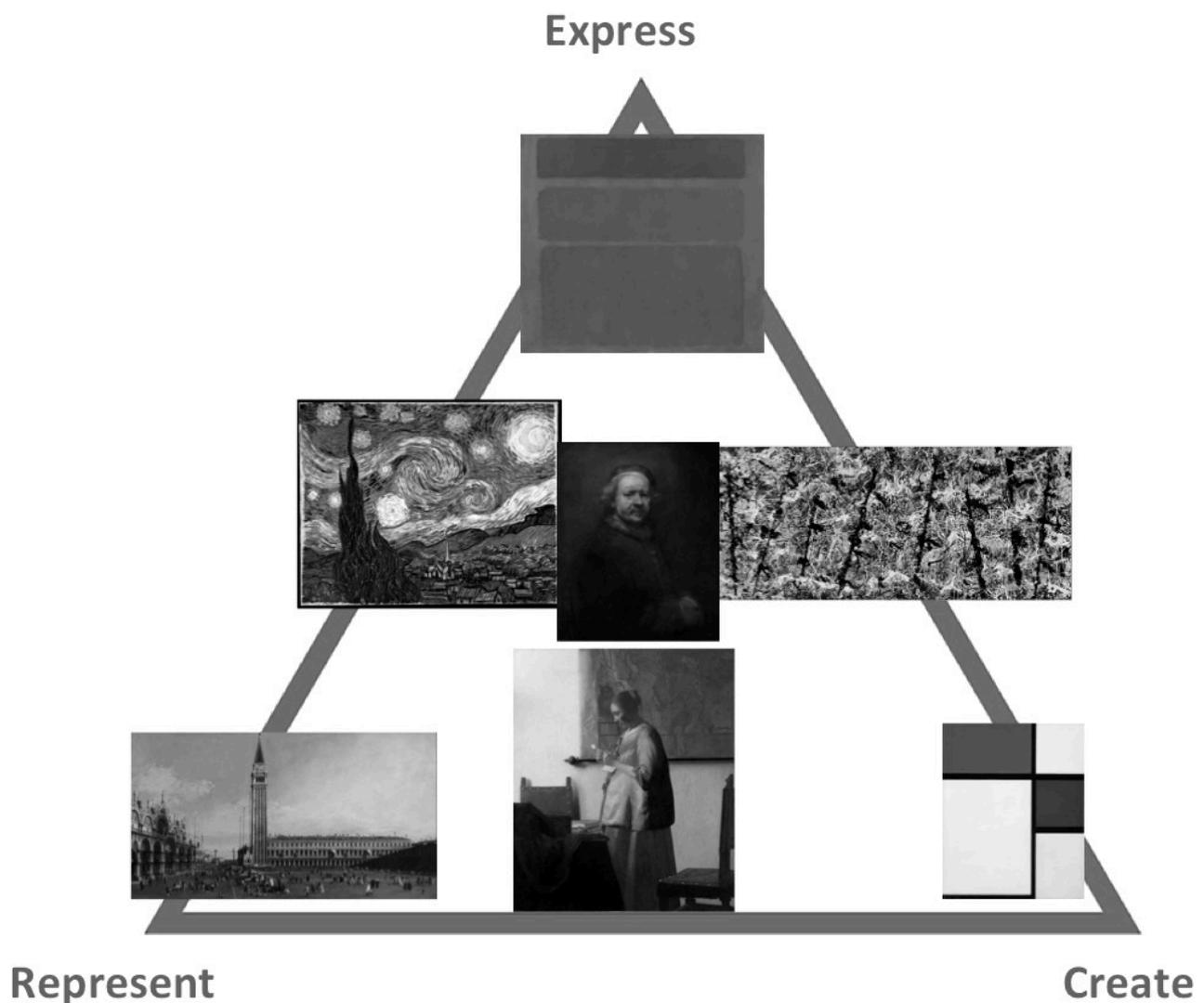
Art can be for...

- Creating
- Representing
- Expressing

Plus ...

- Showing off skill (in *creating, representing or expressing*)
- Experimenting (with *new methods of creating, representing or expressing*)

In fact most artists do the 3 (or 4, or 5) at the same time.



Lecture 3: Getting to know a work of art

Three steps:

1. Look intently

Look non-judgementally. Imagine creating a treasure hunt for others. Include intrinsic implications if possible, e.g. 'What direction was the artist facing?'

2. React and relate

Be imaginative. Use other-sensory equivalents, e.g. 'How would it taste?'

Artworks have many things to offer, e.g. art history, social history, insight into the artist's life, aesthetics, techniques of art... (the 'hooks').

People have many things that interest them, not necessarily including the list above, e.g. food, weather, television, music, sport... (the 'loops').

The first step in art appreciation is **motivation**: to *want* to be there, looking at the art. This will only happen if some hooks catch onto some loops, i.e. if the artwork has some **relevance** to the viewer. So, it's OK to **tease out new hooks**.

Some suggested questions:

- Imagine walking through painting with bare feet. How does it feel?
- Imagine painting is a person. What's the artwork's favourite sport?
- How would it escape from the Gallery?
- What kind of animal would it be?
- Give a weather forecast for the artwork.
- What would it taste like if you could eat it?
- What music would go well with it?
- Does it remind you of a childhood experience?

3. Be critical

Is there such a thing as 'good art', and therefore 'bad art'? While it's tempting to say, 'I know bad art when I see it,' the problems come when we don't know what *good* art is. We need **criteria**.

First, try to determine the artist's aims: describe/express/create.

Every artwork needs **interest** and **unity**.

If an artist breaks with reality (e.g. perspective or proportion), there needs to be a trade-off, in terms of expression and/or composition.

Sometimes, it's easier to be critical of an artwork when comparing it with a *related* work (e.g. William Buelow Gould still life versus Henri Fantin-Latour still life).

Lecture 3 "coda": Reading a gallery room

Rooms in a gallery or art museum aren't arranged randomly or by visual compatibility. They tell stories, usually about styles, movements and major artists. Look for:

- artist's nationality
- year artwork created (or artist's lifespan, if artwork's year not given)
- subject matter
- treatment of subject matter (naturalistic? exaggerated? symbolic?...)
- how other artworks in same room treat the same (or similar) subject matter

Summing up lectures 1–3

- Your own personal responses are valid
- Every artwork has intrinsic info (what you can see) and extrinsic info (what you need to research)
- Aesthetic vision (seeing independently of what you know) \neq survival vision (not bumping into things)
- 1. Look intently ... 2. React/relate ... 3. Be critical (don't skip a step... although there's no hurry for #3)
- Give art time
- Don't forget to "dance"!

Lecture 4: Modern art and its origins

Three seeds of modernism

- **Relativity** – artist acknowledges that his/her experience is not necessarily the same as others'.
E.g. Renaissance (linear perspective), Baroque (dramatic light & shadow), Impressionism (fleeting effects of light & atmosphere)
- **Self-sufficiency** – artwork, as a thing, can be more important than its subject.
E.g. Impressionism (bold, broken colours, obvious brushstrokes), Kandinsky (inspired by Impressionism of Monet)
- **Experimentation** – artist wonders, “Why do I have to always do something according to rules or customs? What would happen if I did it differently?”
E.g. Mannerism (breaking laws of perfect proportion), Dada (ready-made, randomness), Abstract expressionism (physical act of creation, unusual materials)

(Experimentation + self-sufficiency leads to a kind of self-awareness, art about art = the essence of 'post-modernism'.)

Lecture 4 “coda”: Drawing

Drawing is a natural activity. Eg drawing on a foggy window or in sand, and doodling. It is a direct trace of movement. Quality of line can reveal personality. E.g. signatures.

Stages of development in drawing: scribble; controlled scribble; assigning meaning; storytelling; complexity; attempted realism; crisis. After “crisis”, many teenagers abandon drawing altogether.

Why is it important to draw? It helps to exercise the right side of the brain (intuitive, non-verbal), to see *without labeling*. One way to encourage this is to draw things upside-down, so that one is unable to rely on formulae.

Recommended book:

Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (various editions available)

Lecture 5: Western art in 60 minutes

One more myth about art: “Being able to talk about art will get you into the ‘right’ circles.”

Bluffing may be enough for the social art game. However, it is better to *look* at an art work, than to immediately categorise it (or judge it) instead.

But as long as aim is to appreciate individual art work better and not to impress others, it's OK to develop the skill of recognising the period/movement to which an art work belongs.

Timeline: a bird's eye view of western art from ~1400 to present day: see over.

General principles of periods and movements in art history

Periods/movements overlap

E.g. Rococo and Neoclassicism co-existed

Precursors + long tails + revivals

E.g.

- The Norwegian artist Edvard Munch was a **precursor** to German Expressionism.
- Impressionism is still being practised today (a **very long tail**).
- In some ways Pop art was a **revival** of Dadaism (Warhol's Brillo boxes and Duchamp's readymades)

Movements and periods are usually understood as an evolution from, or revolution against, a prevailing philosophy and practice

E.g.

- Italian Baroque evolved from Mannerism.
- The simplicity and symmetry of Neoclassicism was a reaction to the ornamentation and asymmetry of Rococo.

Variations occur, both geographic & personal

E.g. Caravaggio's Baroque style was different to Rembrandt's, partly because Caravaggio was Italian and Rembrandt was Dutch, but also because their personalities were different. That is why his style and that of Rembrandt's Dutch contemporary, Vermeer, are so different.

Many artists belonged to *no* movement

E.g. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, William Blake, Edvard Munch, Jasper Johns

Some artists were associated with more than one movement

E.g. Picasso was associated with several movements, including Cubism, Classicism and Surrealism.

Away from movements' origins, shifts & coalescence occur

E.g.

The Heidelberg School, often referred to as “Australian Impressionism”, was a mixture of English Impressionism (e.g. Whistler), French Impressionism (e.g. Monet) and nationalistic Romanticism (e.g. Delacroix).

What we now call Australian “early modernism” is the result of a number of influences from Europe, including the Post-Impressionists Cézanne and Gauguin, and Fauvism.

There is a fundamental point of difference among periods and movements: how unity is achieved

LINEAR: Art work is an arrangement of several clearly delineated, separate elements. The artist's task is to harmonise them.

PAINTERLY: Art work is, from the beginning of its creation, an indivisible whole. The artist's task is to make forms and colours emerge in interesting ways.

