Looking at paintings


You can see more of Gouws’s paintings if you go to his website www.andriegouws.com. Many of the paintings by other artists that are shown here in black and white, can be seen in colour on the Web Gallery of Art: http://www.wga.hu.

Note: Words in **bold** type are explained in the vocabulary at the end of this booklet.

Learning to see more in paintings

My name is Andries Gouws. I am a painter living in Durban. I hope you will enjoy working with this brochure.

When two different people look at the same thing, or the same paintings, what they see is not the same. Each sees things the other misses. Sometimes it is even hard to believe they are looking at the same thing! We can’t say that one person’s way of looking and seeing is right, and another person’s wrong. But you can learn to look better, and see more, than you do now.

When I look at things and paintings today, I see more than when I was younger.

Perhaps you think art is just about looking at things. But a large part of art is learning to be better at looking. Things. To grow as an artist, it helps to learn to look at works of art more closely – those of others, but also your own.

In this brochure I offer you some questions that can help you look more closely at paintings, and thereby see more in them. These questions will help you to compare different paintings with each other so you can see more clearly what each is like. Don’t worry too much whether your answers to these questions are correct – some of them don’t even have right answers! The important thing is to think about the questions, and to use them to look at paintings and other art works more closely than you do now.

I don’t talk about my paintings in this brochure because they are especially good. They are just meant as examples of art works to ask these questions about, and compare with other art works. Seeing what something is not, helps one to see what it is.

The questions we will ask about paintings

**What paint is used, and on what is it painted?**

**What are its colours like?**

**How big is it?**

**What style is it painted in?** Impressionism? Surrealism? Pop art?

**What is it a painting of?** What sort of things does it show? City scenes? Landscapes? The inside of a house or building? Fruit? People? What are the people doing? Who are the people? Can you recognize them? Are they wearing clothes? Is there a lot of action in the painting? Does the painting tell a story? Does it show a religious figure or event? Is it about everyday life, or about something more exciting? Is it perhaps an abstract painting, in which we cannot recognize clearly what it is about?

(Paintings are often labelled according to what they are paintings of: “A landscape by Rembrandt”, “A crucifixion by Raphael”; and so on.)

Asking such questions about a particular painting invites you to compare it to other paintings:
• if it is small, to compare it to other small paintings, and to bigger paintings
• if its colours are bright, to other brightly coloured paintings but also to less brightly coloured paintings
• if there are no people in it, to compare it to other paintings without people, but also to paintings in which people are important

Many ways of making art

I studied art in Europe, and lived in Holland for 17 years. I still often go to Europe and America to learn from paintings in the museums there. This brochure looks at how my art connects to the history of painting in Europe, and how it compares with other ways of painting.

I find all the paintings shown in this brochure beautiful – much more beautiful than my own work. These are great artists, and I’m not. I don’t think that there is any way of painting which is the right way. But you will understand an artist better if you see how and what she has chosen to paint, out of other possible ways of painting.

Not all pictures made by artists are paintings. Some pictures are drawings (pencil, ink, charcoal, or pastels – a type of soft, coloured chalk). Some pictures are prints, where one has prepared a smooth stone, or a piece of wood, lino or metal in such a way that many copies of the piece of art can be printed from it. This brochure mainly looks at paintings.

Exercise:

See how many different colours you can mix using just three colours: red, yellow and blue. Take a large sheet of paper and paint a little block with each new colour you mix. What happens when you mix blue and yellow? What happens as you slowly add red? Try the same for yellow and red, and for blue and red. Try to find out how to make colours less bright, without using white or black.

Oil colours (see image in previous column)

I paint using oil colours, a type of paint artists have used for about 600 years. The paints used before that had less brilliant colours, did not look the same after they had dried as while one was working on them, and allowed less detail than oil paints did. The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck was one of the first to use oil paints.

Here is his famous **portrait** of a man and wife:

Jan van Eyck (1385-1441) Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife 1434 Oil on oak National Gallery, London

Other artists use acrylic paint, a modern type of paint that can look similar, but is mixed with water instead of oil. **Watercolours** are a different type of water based paints, and are usually used on paper. Paintings in oil colours are usually made on canvas or on wooden board, which has been prepared with a white layer, called a **primer**. Some of my paintings (like those on page 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the catalogue) are on board, and some (like those on the front and back cover of the catalogue) on canvas. The board I use is smooth and hard, while canvas has a textured surface.

Oil colours can be used very thick, so that the paintbrush leaves behind a thick trail of paint. This is called **impasto**. We find it in the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh’s (1853-1890) paintings, like Wheatfield with crows – the last painting he made before his death. (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam).

I don’t use impasto. (Nor did Van Eyck). While painting, I add a lot of oil to my paint, so that it is thinner, and you can see through one layer of paint to the layers below. These thin, translucent layers are called **glares**.

**Mixing colours**

There are hundreds of different colours of oil paint that artists can buy. But artists usually get all the different colours you see in their paintings by mixing a much smaller number of colours.

I often mix every colour in a painting using just three colours, plus white. (Most artists use many more colours than this). Sometimes (see p. 1, 2 of my catalogue) the three colours are yellow ochre (a yellowish brown), burnt amber (a dark brown), and viridian (a bluish green), sometimes (see front cover, p. 7) ochre, magenta (a purplish dark red) and viridian.

Exercise:

See how many different colours you can mix using just three colours: red, yellow and blue. Take a large sheet of paper and paint a little block with each new colour you mix. What happens when you mix blue and yellow? What happens as you slowly add red? Try the same for yellow and red, and for blue and red. Try to find out how to make colours less bright, without using white or black.

Andries Gouws  Piero, Winterbach and Mpungose 2006 University of Stellenbosch Art Museum.
A very important question to ask about a painter is: how does the artist use colour? Are her colours bright, or not? Does she use many different colours, or not?

**Exercise:**
Find examples of paintings that use many bright colours, and paintings that don’t use many bright colours, or very bright colours. What difference does it make? Look at my catalogue. Would you call the colours in my paintings bright? Would you prefer it if my colours were different?

Another thing to ask about a painting: what size is it?

Paintings come in all sizes. What size a painting is, makes a big difference to the effect it has on the viewer.

My paintings are quite small (p.7). At 40 X 54 cm. the painting on the cover of this brochure (Piero, Winterbach and Mpungose) is one of my biggest.

Most painters work bigger than I do, but some work even smaller. This is the actual size of this self-portrait by Hilliard.

Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) English  Self-portrait aged 30  1577 Watercolour on prepared calf’s skin Victoria and Albert Museum, London
[[Note to layout person: slightly less than 5 centimetres diameter]]

A very big painting is this one by the Italian painter Veronese. It is almost 10 metres wide and 7 metres high, and it hangs in the Louvre, a huge museum in Paris, the capital of France:

Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) The wedding feast at Cana  1563  666 x 990 cm  Louvre, Paris

**Exercise:**
Make three paintings (or drawings): one on a quarter A4 sheet, one on an A4 sheet, and one on an A2 sheet (or larger). Does the size change the way you work? What felt different about working on each size? How do the results differ? What size do you prefer working on yourself? Now write down a few possible reasons why somebody would prefer making small paintings.

A further important thing to ask about a painting: What is it about? What does it show?

(Sometimes people ask: “What does it depict?” “Depict” is a useful word to know — “to depict” is “to picture”)

A painting can be about anything.

**Paintings can be portraits.**
What is this a picture of? Do you find it pretty? Does it make you sad?

This painting is called The crucifixion, and it is very big – 269 X 307 cm. It was painted by the German artist Grünewald (1470/80-1528). It seems that Grünewald was not striving for beauty in this painting, but meant it more like a sermon to show the believers the horror of the crucifixion.

This is an example of a religious painting, just as the example we previously showed of an even bigger painting, Veronese’s Wedding feast at Cana. For a long time most of the art made in Europe was religious art, usually showing scenes from the Bible. In places with other religions, religious art shows persons, gods or scenes from the scriptures belonging to those religions.

An example of religious art from Southern Africa is this lino print of Adam and Eve (1967) by the great Namibian/South African artist John Muafangejo (1943-1987). I own one of the prints of this work.

This following image shows how the Italian painter Piero della Francesca (1416-1492) painted the Flagellation – the whipping of Christ, with Pontius Pilate looking on. It hangs in the Ducal Palace in the Italian city of Urbino. Whereas the painting by Grünewald emphasises the horror of what is happening, there is a strange calmness in this painting. This painting has inspired me a lot. Have you run into it before in this brochure?

Paintings can be about myths and other stories. Other paintings showed stories from Greek and Roman history or mythology – that is, stories about the heroes and gods of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The paintings we show here were made at a time when people no longer believed in these gods, but still admired Greek and Roman culture – sculpture, literature, [vase] painting. These paintings are often heroic:

Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) The oath of the Horatii 1784 330 x 425 cm Louvre, Paris

The French painter David chose this topic because he thought the bravery of these citizens of ancient Rome was a good example to the citizens of the France of his time.

Or dramatic:

El Greco (1541-1614) Spanish Laokoon 1610 142 x 193 cm National Gallery of Art, Washington

This painting shows a priest and his sons fighting with snakes that the gods had sent to kill them. This story is found in the Iliad, which describes the war between the ancient Greeks and the Trojans.

Paintings can also be heroic or dramatic in other ways:
Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)  
**Liberty leading the people (28th July 1830)**
1830  260 x 325 cm  Louvre, Paris

This painting shows a political event that happened in the year in which Delacroix painted it, but adds something like an element of mythology in showing freedom ("Liberty") as a person, a woman who leads the uprising by the French people.

Théodore Géricault (1781-1824)  
**The raft of the Medusa**  1818-19  491 x 716 cm  Louvre, Paris

Here the French painter shows the survivors of a famous shipwreck of his time in a way that reminds us of the dramatic way in which religious and mythological subjects had previously been painted.

**QUESTION**: What differences strike you when you put my paintings next to these dramatic paintings? And when you put Piero della Francesca’s Flagellation next to them?

Pieter Pauwel Rubens (1577-1640)  
**The rape of the daughters of Leucippus**  1618  224 x 210.5 cm  Alte Pinakothek, Munich

This painting is about an ancient Greek myth. The two daughters of King Leucippus were engaged to be married, but the twins Castor and Pollux carried them off by force (an old meaning of the word “rape”) instead, before their wedding.

Look at how this painting differs from Velasquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X. Here it is important what these people are doing. In portraits people usually just sit or stand. The pope is sitting quietly; these people and horses are moving. Rubens’s painting tells an exciting story, while there is no clear story attached to the portrait of the Pope. Here I have simplified both pictures into black and white to help you notice other differences.

The outline of the figures in Rubens’s mythological painting is far more complicated, restless and unbalanced than that of the portrait of the Pope. And the lines in themselves suggest movement. Now that you have seen how paintings can suggest movement, you are ready to think about the following question:

**QUESTION**: Why don't my paintings suggest movement, the way the above paintings by Rubens, Géricault, Delacroix, and El Greco do? How does movement make a painting different?

Paintings can be of nudes

The word "nude" is used to refer to naked people in painting or sculpture. Sometimes paintings like the one by Rubens showed nudes while telling a story, but sometimes there was no story attached to the nude in the painting. Some people think that these were simply earlier versions of today’s pinups.
The Greeks had often shown their figures nude. About two thousand years later, when Christian
painters started painting nudes again, they found it very difficult, important and exciting to
understand how the human body is constructed, and to find ways of painting the body in a
convincing way. Some artists even dissected corpses (cut up the bodies of dead people) to better
understand human anatomy (what the parts of the body are, and how they fit together). Among
these artists were Michelangelo and Leonardo, two of the very greatest Italian artists of a period
called the Renaissance. For hundreds of years after this, studying anatomy was an important
part of the training for future artists in Europe.

About four hundred years ago, a new type of art arose in the West (Europe): the landscape
painting. (In China and Japan artists had already been painting landscapes much earlier). Artists
had previously shown landscapes (fields, mountains, rivers, and so on) as part of religious
paintings, heroic paintings, or portraits, but now artists started making paintings in which the
landscape itself is the main focus.

Paintings can be of landscapes

Some paintings show scenes from everyday life

For a long time paintings almost always had something extraordinary as their subject matter
(what it pictured): very special people or beings (heroes, gods, kings, popes), often belonging to
a very different time and place.

About four hundred years ago, some painters started painting scenes of the everyday life around
them, which had previously not been seen as important enough to paint. Many of these were
interiors – pictures showing the insides of houses, and the people working or living there.

Some paintings show interiors.