Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) French

Return from the market 1739  Louvre, Paris

This interior (above) by Chardin shows a servant returning from the market. She isn’t special, nor is she doing anything exciting.

Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) Dutch

A young woman standing at a virginal  c. 1670
51.7 x 45.2 cm  National Gallery, London

This interior by Vermeer is slightly different. The woman is not a servant, but wealthy enough to have the piano-like instrument she is playing (called a virginal), and the time to play it. Her pearls and silk dress, as well as the paintings on the wall, also show her wealth.

Edouard Manet Bar at the Folies-Bergères 1881-82  96 x 130 cm  Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

French impressionism was a new turn in the depiction of everyday people in everyday surroundings. Manet led the way with pictures like this one of a barmaid in a Paris nightspot.

Exercise
Find out more about French impressionism from an encyclopaedia, history of art, or the Internet.

The still life

This type of painting of the everyday world is called the still life. This focuses not on people or animals, but on things like fruit, dead game, glasses, jugs, and pipes. Sometimes, as in this still life by Heda, the objects chosen were meant to suggest a life of wealth: rare fruits, expensive tableware, and precious rugs. Sometimes the still life was meant to remind people of how short life is, and how unwise it is to attach too much value to wealth. But over time painters often stopped being interested in such meanings, as in Manet’s bunch of asparagus, or one of the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi’s paintings.

QUESTIONS
Traditional genres and painting today

Many painters today do not want to paint in a way that reminds people of the way European artists painted in the past. They want to paint something different from what used to be seen as the right sorts of things to paint. We have seen that traditional topics include: religious ones, the gods and heroes of ancient Greek and Roman culture, portraits, nudes, landscapes, interiors, still lifes. Throughout history, the way in which paintings were made, kept on changing. Starting about four hundred years ago, artists became more and more interested in showing everyday life, rather than grand topics, and everyday people, rather than perfect people.

QUESTION: To what genre or genres would you say that my paintings belong?

New styles. Moving away from the tradition of realism

We have looked at different things that can be the subject of a painting. However, during the last century, the changes in how people painted were more important than the changes in what they painted. For many centuries, the ideal of artists was to paint in such a way that one seemed to be looking at the things themselves. But in the twentieth century (1900-1999) almost every important painter rebelled against the tradition of realism in painting.

In this no-one was more influential than the great Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Above is a painting in just one of the many styles in which he painted at various stages of his life.

Paintings by so-called surrealists, like Max Ernst and Salvador Dali, were often dream-like. While they painted recognizable things (like fingers, walnuts, bird’s heads, or giraffes), they showed them in combinations not found in real life. They wanted to show the inner reality of our mind rather than outer reality.
Non-figurative (or "abstract") painting

One important movement in twentieth century (1900-1999) painting said that painting should stop being "figurative". This means it should stop picturing anything at all. Some people said that all painting was really nothing but an arrangement of lines and colours on a surface. The hope was that once artists realised this, they would be able to concentrate on arranging these lines and colours really well, and thus make better paintings.

Painters like Kandinsky, Mondrian and Rothko, however, saw abstract painting differently. For them it was a way to express a deeper truth about a reality lying beyond the visible world.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) Russian Improvisation no. 7 1910 131 x 97 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Piet Mondriaan (1872-1944) Dutch Composition no. 10 1939-42 80 x 73 cm. Private collection

QUESTION: How does Mondrian’s painting make you feel? How do you think the artist who made it felt? Would you like to make art like this?

People studying art around 1960 to 1975 (including myself) were often told that no important or worthwhile art could still be "figurative", that is, depict things like people, faces, landscapes, and so on, even if this was done in a way that wasn’t "realist". All this was a thing of the past, it was said. The reason given was often that the camera had taken away the need for any painting of this sort.

Is painting dead?

For some artists, like Marcel Duchamp, abstract painters weren’t going far enough. Duchamp said that painting as such was dead. He made fun of the enormous respect people show for traditional art. Here he did so by drawing a moustache and goatee on a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s famous portrait the Mona Lisa:


According to all these ways of thinking, it would be wrong to paint in the way I do. I am still painting, while many people said painting was dead. Instead, I am still painting in a way that is closely related in style and topic to traditional ways of painting – for instance Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. This would be an objection to all those people who thought that a painter today should avoid any resemblance to art from previous centuries.

Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) Dutch Lady with a lute 1664 51.4 x 45.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

I use photographs when I paint, and my paintings sometimes resemble photographs. This would be an objection to somebody who thought that painting like this was a mistake, because this sort of thing can much better be left to photography.
Another criticism could be that my art is too "European" or "Eurocentric", the idea being that art made in South Africa should be less like European art, and more like the work of local artists like Muafangejo (two line prints shown previously) and Mphumgi (see the sculptures shown in my painting on the cover of this brochure), whose work is recognizably "African" in style.

A final criticism could be that my art does not deal with the big social issues of our time, or contribute to social change. Shouldn’t I follow the example of artists whose work addresses social injustices like apartheid, or issues like war, the ill-treatment of women, gay people, or AIDS sufferers?

This print comes from the great Spanish artist Goya’s series of etchings (a type of print) called The Disasters of War. Many art works over the centuries had celebrated warfare as one of the noblest things a man can be involved in. In contrast, Goya emphasises the stupidity and cruelty of war. After Goya many other artists have made work protesting against war.

In 1980, the South African artist Paul Stoopforth made a series of powerful images of victims of the apartheid police. In this one we see the body of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, who died in police custody. In this one we see the body of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, who died in police custody. Though I admire, and have been influenced by the way they did. But the same is true of more recent artists like Picasso, the surrealists, or the first abstract painters. If we try to do the same thing as they did, it will also be completely different. To me the artist has as much right to be inspired by artists from four or five hundred years ago, as by these more recent artists. And I believe that there is as much danger in being inspired by these more recent artists as in being inspired by older artists. So whatever one does, one is in danger of making bad art!

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) Here neither 1812-15 Etching and aquatint, 158 x 208 mm

Paul Stoopforth Elegy 1980 Graphite and acrylic Durban Art Gallery

In 1980, the South African artist Paul Stoopforth made a series of powerful images of victims of the apartheid police. In this one we see the body of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, who died in police custody.

We have looked at a number of possible criticisms of the sort of thing I do (or don’t do) in my painting. The ideals of art that lead to such criticisms, have produced many wonderful works of art. But criticisms like these don’t worry me much. I know there are many different ways of making good art. Before I settled into my current way of painting I tried many of the things suggested by such criticisms, and they didn’t work for me. I am more worried about becoming better at the sort of thing I already do.

Fortunately for me, people today are not as inclined any more to see one particular way of making art as the correct way. Things have changed since the days when one was told that all art should be abstract art, for instance. Abstract art itself is now just one way of painting among other ways, and even one that is rather out of fashion. (A bad reason to stop making abstract art, if that is what you want to do).

How traditional is my work?

Though my work is closer to the tradition than much other art being made today, it also differs from traditional art in all sorts of ways.

Sometimes artists make something different from traditional art just by continuing in the same direction art has already been going in for a long time. We have seen that there has been a movement away from big, intrinsically "beautiful", "important" or "interesting" topics in Western art for at least a few centuries now. In a way my work, and that of many other contemporary artists, continues this movement. Perhaps this will help you understand the subject matter of some of my paintings: a bar of soap (p. 7); a piece of floor with a wall plug (p. 12); a piece of wall with a wall plug; a wash basin (p. 8 & 19). These are things that would normally not be considered worthy of a second glance. The lack of importance of the object echoes something in abstract art.

Though I admire, and have been influenced by 17th Century Dutch art, I also know that it is impossible to paint like that today, even if one wants to, and even if one is very talented. These painters hadn’t seen art from the subsequent centuries, abstract art, photography, advertising, billboards, films, TV, video clips, and so on. We have: This means that we can never see things the way they did. But the same is true of more recent artists like Picasso, the surrealists, or the

In conclusion I want to show you some examples with a similar subject-matter to that often found in my paintings, by two living painters I greatly admire, Lucian Freud (UK) and Gerard Richter (Germany).

Gerhard Richter is an interesting painter, who sometimes makes figurative work, like the paintings of the toilet roll in the next column, and sometimes abstract paintings. (Yemen is one of the artists he most admires, just as I do). I studied at the Art Academy of Düsseldorf (Germany), where he taught, for eighteen months in 1972-1973, but at the time I was making graphic art rather than paintings. His way of working also did not appeal to me at that time. So I missed the chance of working under an artist I today greatly admire!

Lucian Freud (born 1922) Two Japanese wrestlers by a sink 1983-7 60 X 79 cm Art Institute of Chicago

In the 1960s some of Lucian Freud’s fellow artists who were more famous at the time, looked down on him. They thought that his work was too ‘traditional’ to be important, and be part of the big modern thing that was happening in art. Today, however, he is one of the most highly regarded artists in the world.

Andries Gouws Plug 1 Oil on canvas 2003 Collection: Prof. Lou-Marie Kruger, Stellenbosch.
Concluding questions

What answers to the following questions can you think of? (It is more important that you use your imagination to think of different possible answers, than that you try to get the right answer):

- Why doesn’t Andries Gouws use brighter colours?
- Why does Andries Gouws make such small paintings?
- Why doesn’t Andries Gouws paint things that are more beautiful in themselves?
- Why doesn’t Andries Gouws paint things that are more exciting?

Now ask yourself the following

- What don’t I like, or what do I least like, about Andries Gouws’s paintings? (Try and say why you dislike the things you dislike).

Finally ask yourself

- In what ways would I like my own work (paintings, drawings, and so on) to be different from Andries Gouws’s paintings? Why?
- Would I like to try doing something more like other works shown here? Which ones? Why?
- Would I like to do something totally different from anything shown here? Why? Try to find words to describe what you would like to do, and how it differs from the works shown here.

Andries Gouws would like to thank the following people for their valuable advice or feedback on this educational supplement

Julia Clare
Liesbeth-Helena Gouws
Philippa Hobbs, MTN Foundation
Jean Martin, Durban Girls’ College
Neath Moore, Durban Girls’ High School
Daleen Jansen van Vuuren
Esther (Olievenhuis)
Ingrid Winterbach
Mercia van Wyk, Royal Netherlands Embassy, Pretoria

Sponsored by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Pretoria

This brochure is not for sale. Art educators are free to make as many digital or hard copies of it as needed for educational purposes.

Text: Andries Gouws, Durban 2008

Vocabulary:

Abstract art: art in which “the recognizable representation of physical reality” either plays no role, or is less important than the effect achieved “by grouping shapes and colours in satisfying patterns” (based on Concise Oxford Dictionary)
Anatomy: study of the parts of the body, and how they fit together (how the body is constructed)
Canvas: a sturdy fabric made of cotton or linen
Depict: to show something, in the form of a picture (or sculpture)
Greek and Roman mythology: made-up stories, called myths, about the heroes and gods of the ancient Greeks and Romans — heroes such as Ulysses, Achilles, and Hector; gods like Zeus (Roman: Jupiter), the king of the gods; Aphrodite (Roman: Venus), the goddess of love.
Glaze: thin layer of paint that allows layers beneath it to show through
Neoclassic: applying the culture of Europe as the standard and the ideal for the whole world.
Figurative art: “art which portrays, in however altered or distorted form, things perceived in the visible world.” (Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms)
Flemish: Dutch-speaking person from what is now Belgium
Genre: types of painting (named after their subject-matter)
Impasto: thickly applied paint
Interior: Painting showing the inside of a house or building
Landscape: A picture representing outdoor scenery, especially natural scenery.
Lino print: print made from a sheet of lino, from which certain parts (white) have been cut to get the image
Non-figurative art: art “containing no representation of recognizable figures or objects.” (Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms)
Nude: a naked person in a work of art
Portrait: picture of an actual person, made in such a way that viewers will clearly recognize that person.
Primer: coating applied to canvas or board as preparation for painting on it
Renaissance: “Art which aims to reproduce reality exactly.” (Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms)
Self-portrait: A portrait made by an artist of him- or herself
Still life: “work of art depicting non-living subject matter, usually ordinary things which may be either natural (such as flowers, game or sea shells) or man-made (such as drinking glasses, foodstuffs, pipes or books).” (Concise Oxford Dictionary)
Surrealists: artists belonging to surrealism, the twentieth century “movement in art and literature aiming at expressing the subconscious mind” (Concise Oxford Dictionary) — the subconscious mind is the state of mind found, for example, in dreaming.
Translucent: letting through light