**Evaluation & Appreciation of Structural and Decorative Design**

The task of evaluating a work of art, such as a painting or a sculpture, requires a combination of objective information and subjective opinion. Yes, it's true that art appreciation is highly subjective, but the aim of evaluating a picture is not simply to ascertain whether you like/dislike a picture, but WHY you like/dislike it. And this requires a certain amount of knowledge. Art evaluators need to generate facts upon which to base their opinions: namely, facts about (1) the context of the artwork; and (2) the artwork itself. Once we have the facts, we can then make our assessment.

**How to Appreciate a Work of Art**

The easiest way to get to understand and therefore appreciate a work of art is to investigate its context, or background. This is because it helps us to understand what was (or might have been) in the mind of the artist at the time he created the work in question. Think of it as basic detective work.

1. **How to Evaluate the Context/Background of the Work?**

**When was the Painting Created?**

Knowing the date of the work helps us to gauge how it was made, and the degree of difficulty involved. For instance, landscapes produced before the popularity of photography (c.1860), or the appearance of collapsible tin paint tubes (1841), had a greater level of difficulty.

**Is the Painting Abstract or Representational?**

A painting can be wholly abstract (meaning, it has no resemblance to any natural shapes: a form known as [non-objective art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/non-objective-art.htm)), or organically abstract (some resemblance to natural organic forms), or semi-abstract (figures and other objects are discernible to an extent), or [representational](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/representational-art.htm) (its figurative and other content is instantly recognizable). Obviously an abstract work has quite different aims to that of a representational work, and must be judged according to different criteria. For example, a wholly abstract picture makes no attempt to divert the viewer with any [naturalism](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/naturalism.htm) and thus depends entirely for its effect on its formal qualities (line, shape, colour and so on).

**What Type of Painting is It?**

Paintings come in different types or categories (known as [painting genres](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/painting-genres.htm)). The established genres are: (1) History Painting - with religious paintings being perhaps an independent category;

(2) Portraiture;

(3) Genre Painting;

(4) Landscape Painting;

(5) Still Life.

This hierarchy reflected the moral impact of each genre. Experts believed that a moral message could be conveyed much more clearly through a history picture, a portrait or a genre painting, rather than a landscape or still life.

Other types of painting, in addition to the above five, include: cityscapes, marine paintings, icons, altarpieces, miniatures, murals, illuminations, illustrations, caricatures, cartoons, poster art, graffiti, animal pictures, and so on.

**Where Was the Picture Painted?**

Knowing where and under what circumstances a painting is created can often improve our appreciation and understanding of the work concerned.

**At What Point Was the Artist in His Career? What Was His Background?**

Knowing whether a painting was created early or late in a painter's life can often assist our appreciation of the work.

Artists typically improve their painting technique with time, achieve a high point sometime in mid-career, and then fade in later years. Some artists, however, have died at the height of their powers. Understanding the background of the artist can also explain a huge amount about his/her painting.

**B. How to Evaluate the Work of Art Itself**

Once we have investigated or researched the context of the painting, we can begin to appreciate the work itself. Knowing how to appreciate a painting is itself an art rather than a science. And perhaps the most difficult aspect of art evaluation is judging the painting method itself: that is, how the actual painting has been done? It is with great humility therefore that we offer these suggestions for how to evaluate the actual **painting technique** used.

**What Materials were Used in the Creation of the Painting?**

What sort of paint was used? What type of ground or support did the painter employ? The answers to these questions can furnish interesting information about the intentions of the artist. The standard materials are oil paint on canvas. Oil because of its richness of colour, canvas because of its adaptability. However, [acrylics](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/acrylic-painting.htm) or [watercolours](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/watercolour-painting.htm) are used instead of oils when thin glazes are required, and acrylics are also better when large flat areas of colour are called for

**What is the Content & Subject Matter of the Painting?**

What is being depicted in the painting?

If it's a historical picture or [mythological painting](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/genres/mythological-painting.htm), ask yourself these questions: What event is being shown? What characters are involved, and what are their roles? What message does the painting contain?

If it's a portrait, ask yourself these questions: Who is the sitter? How does the artist portray him/her? What features or aspects of the sitter are given prominence or attention?

If it's a genre-scene, ask yourself these questions: What scene is being depicted? What is happening? What message (if any) does the painter have for us? Why has he chosen this particular scene?

If it's a landscape, ask yourself these questions: What is the geographical location of the view in the picture? (eg. Is it a favourite haunt of the painter?) What is the artist trying to convey to us about the landscape?

If it's a still-life, ask yourself these questions: What objects - no matter how seemingly insignificant - are included in the picture? Why has the artist chosen these particular items? Why has he laid them out in the way he has? Still lifes are known for their symbolism, so it's worth analyzing the objects painted, to see what each might symbolize.

**How to Appreciate Composition in a Painting?**

Composition means the overall design ([disegno](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/drawing/disegno.htm)), the general layout. And how a painting is laid out is vital since it largely determines its visual impact. Why? Because a well composed painting will attract and guide the viewer's eye around the picture. Painters who excelled at composition were invariably classically trained in the great academies, where composition was a highly regarded element in the painting process.

**How to Appreciate Line and Shape in a Painting?**

The skill of a painter is often revealed in the strength and confidence of his line (outline), creating and delineating the various shapes in his picture.

**How to Appreciate Colour in a Painting?**

[Colour in painting](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/colour-in-painting.htm) is a major influence on our emotions, and therefore plays a huge part in how we appreciate art.

**How to Appreciate Texture and Brushwork in a Painting?**

When it comes to learning how to evaluate texture and brushwork in painting, there is no substitute for visiting a gallery or museum and seeing some canvases for yourself. Brushwork can be tight (slower, precise, controlled) or loose (more rapid, more casual, more expressionistic). It is largely determined by the style and mood of the painting, rather than (say) the temperament of the artist.

**How to Appreciate Beauty in a Painting?**

[Aesthetics](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/aesthetics.htm) is an intensely personal subject. We all see things differently, including "art", and especially "beauty". In addition, painting is first and foremost a visual art - something we see, rather than think about. So if we are asked whether we think a painting is beautiful, we are likely to give a fairly instant response.

**What Proportions are Evident in the Picture?**  
[Greek art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/greek-art.htm) and [Renaissance art](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/renaissance-art.htm) was often based on certain rules of proportion, which accorded with classical views on optical harmony. So maybe the beauty you see (or not) can be partly explained by reference to the proportions (of objects and figures) in the work.

**Are Certain Shapes or Patterns Repeated in the Painting?**  
According to psychologists, repetition of pleasing shapes, especially in symmetrical patterns, can relax the eye and the brain, causing us to feel pleasure.  
  
**Do the Colours Used in the Painting Complement Each Other?**  
Colour schemes with complementary hues or tonal variations are known for their appealing effect on the senses.

**Does the Picture Draw You in? Does it Maintain Your Attention?**  
The greatest paintings are the easiest to look at. They attract our attention, and then "signposts" guide our eye around the work.