

The Parkville Frame Gallery Newsletter

2023 Newsletter #23-4 (Jul/Aug)

Note: To see our “Top Picks”. [Click Here](#)

Subject: How to Look at Art

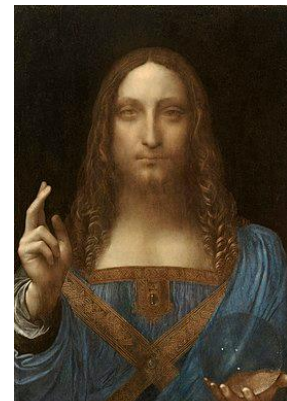
Let’s assume that you are going to visit the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, or the [Getty Museum](#) in Los Angeles. Or maybe you are planning a trip to Paris and will visit the Louvre, or the [Museo Nacional del Prado](#) in Madrid. Wherever your travels take you, looking at fine art may be on your agenda. How to interpret and understand fine art can sometimes be a little intimidating, maybe even overwhelming.



Please allow me to suggest that you look at all art from the following five perspectives.

1. Subject
2. Interpretation
3. Style
4. Context
5. Emotion

1. **Subject:** The *subject* of the art can be many different things: religious, historical, genre, landscape, etc. For example, the subject of this religious painting which is attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, is *Salvator Mundi*.



[More Here](#)

Salvator Mundi

2. **Interpretation:** Continuing with religion as our subject, look at how two different artists interpreted the painting of *The Annunciation*. Keep in mind that neither artist actually witnessed that event. Italian artist [Luca Giordano](#) shows us his “interpretation”, and Spanish artist [Bartolome Esteban Murillo](#) shows us his. Although each interpretation is different, each conveys the essence of the event. As a viewer, we are, of course, entitled to our interpretation.



Luca Giordano



Bartolome Esteban Murillo

3. Style: Every artist has her or his own *style*. Consider the popular painting: *Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh. Compare his style to the very different style of Japanese artist [Uemura Tsune](#) (aka Shoen) in her lovely painting *Daughter Miyuki*.



Starry Night



Daughter Miyuki

4. Context: The term *context* is a little more challenging to define than are subject, interpretation, and style. Consider the painting: [The Rue Montorgueil in Paris](#), painted by Claud Monet in June 1878 for a festival declared that year by the French government celebrating "peace and work". Taken in context, this painting was/is important to the French because it was created at a time when France was recovering from terrible revolutions and upheaval in their country.

5. Emotion: The term *emotion* is somewhat easier to define. We usually know emotion it when we see it. Consider the painting shown below: *The Suicide of Lucretia* painted by Rembrandt van Rijn in 1666.

Compare that painting to *The Milkmaids* painted by Nicolai Baskakov in 1962.





The Suicide of Lucretia [More Here](#)



The Milkmaids

When one views *The Suicide of Lucretia* the emotion is almost palpable. I saw this painting displayed in the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Because I know the backstory, seeing Lucretia's eyes said it all. Conversely, *The Milkmaids* never fails to bring a smile.

Backstory: The complex painting *Guernica* shown below was created by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. This painting creates a confusing – very confusing -- first impression. That said, as we become aware of the painting's *backstory*, we begin to develop a better understanding of the message that Picasso was trying to convey.



Guernica

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In the painting *Guernica*, the scene occurs inside a room where, on the left, a wide-eyed bull with a tail suggesting rising flame and smoke as seen through a window, stands over a grieving woman holding a dead child in her arms. A horse falls in agony in the center of the room. A dead and dismembered soldier lies under the horse. On the horse's upper right the head and extended right arm of a frightened female figure appears to have floated into the room through a window, and she witnesses the scene.

Picasso painted *Guernica* at his home in Paris in response to the 26 April 1937 bombing of Guernica, a Basque Country town in northern Spain that was bombed by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy at the request of the Spanish Nationalists.

As is often the case, a complex and potentially confusing painting such as *Guernica*, and many other works of art, become more understandable and meaningful to us when we know the art work's backstory.

Let's apply what we have learned about *How to Look at Art* to the painting shown below: [Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus](#). This painting was created by American artist Benjamin West in 1768.

First, apply the five elements:

1. Subject (religious, historical, genre, landscape, etc.)
2. Interpretation (Benjamin West would have known the backstory well.)
3. Style
4. Context (Remember, this was painted in 1768.)
5. Emotion (Carefully study the people depicted in this painting.)

Next, explore the all-important backstory in the accompanying Yale University Broadcast Center video.

[Video Here](#)

