

An approachable guide to Old Master painting from a new perspective that offers a simple aid to looking, demystifying the often obscure strategies of the great painters of all time

Look Again

How to Experience the Old Masters

Ossian Ward

90 Illustrations

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Praise for *Look Again*

‘Ossian Ward shows in an intelligent and accessible way that all art, in essence, is contemporary’
Taco Dibbits, Director, Rijksmuseum



Key Sales Points

- The perfect gateway to experiencing the greatest artists of history
- From the spectacular theatrics of Bosch to the harmonious simplicity of Cézanne, Ossian Ward tackles some of history's most iconic art in all its drama, horror and beauty
- A dynamic author who invites the reader in with informative and lively text
- Attractive, affordable and portable format makes this an irresistibly pick-up-able publication

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audience. This would have been a wholly innovative style of portraiture, whereas the older man is depicted in strict profile, as befitting official imagery commemorating elder statesmen on coins, medals and the like. It has been suggested that the father was painted after his death, given this death-mask profile and his sunken cheeks. Further inspection reveals that the father too had been in the building trade and might also be playing the organ in the background, further suggesting this was painted as a mark of respect by a doting son who wanted his father to be seen alongside him in perpetuity.

Piero di Cosimo, *Portraits of Giuliano and Francesco Giamberti da Sangallo*, 1482-88. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



A for ASSESSMENT

It's time to take stock and make up your mind as to whether the work works for you, or not. Art's subjective nature – to one man a beauty, to another an aberration – means that there is no right or wrong answer here. Hopefully this process, which could just as well apply to any act of visual appreciation, should take no longer than necessary and not become a barrier to enjoyment or constitute a chore. Much of the analytical technique outlined above is instinctual enough so that it can be easily practiced, quickly honed and perhaps shortened or lengthened according to one's experience or familiarity with an image.

Then again, maybe there was not enough T for Time, or you found no meaningful Association to connect with. Maybe you are alone in a church staring at an altarpiece, for example, with no Background to speak of and therefore little hope of any quick Understanding. Maybe you took a few moments to Look again but found no reason to dwell even on the second time of asking. This is an admission that the formula can fail. So, of all the letters in this mnemonic to forgo, this is probably the one, because looking at art is not about coming to any definite conclusions. You can never be truly finished with a work of art, no matter how familiar it seems. Instead, decide if there is more to be learnt or if it's better to walk away. This assessment is not the final roll of the dice. In fact, I have developed a further set of prompts to help finish the job, given the specific conditions of looking at Old Masters, which in their way can be harder to like or read than contemporary art. Their traditions, tastes and pictorial norms have changed so radically since their creation as to seem largely alien to our eyes.

Spotlight on Assessment

There can be no better imagery to pit your skills of assessment against in the whole of art history than that of the ultimate reckoning: the Last Judgment itself, when God casts souls to hell or brings them up with him into heaven. Which way will the work of art you are contemplating go? How do you even begin to judge the work: by its technical proficiency, its effect, its ideas or the connection it makes to you? Certainly all of the above would be a start and here, in the painting by Jan van Eyck, we have talent and craft in abundance (these are highly involved and detailed scenes for such a tiny pair of paintings, each just 20cm wide),

as well as compositional power and emotional impact that are far from proportionate to their small size. Yet despite its obvious brilliance, maybe the treatment of the thronging mourners and soldiers of the Crucifixion is not as original or captivating as that of the right-hand panel, in which ranks of angels fan out above a winged death-head guarding the underworld (it has been suggested that the diptych is missing a third, possibly central, panel). Maybe the subject matter does not grip the contemporary viewer, but the intricacies and deft touches should be assurances enough that these are indeed masterpieces to behold. But each assessment is personal and subjective, so after tackling the procedural approach to a painting, by walking around it and tabulating its merits, try to interrogate further by moving beyond the blank slate to the next stage of appreciation: R.A.S.A.



Jan van Eyck, *The Crucifixion; The Last Judgment*, c. 1440-41. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Opposite Jan van Eyck, *The Crucifixion; The Last Judgment*, detail



Chapter 4

Art as Beauty

Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them. *Marcus Aurelius, 170*

Beauty seems like such an old fashioned notion that nowadays we almost dare not speak its name. Indeed, Old Masters are so often judged by attractiveness alone that it has almost become an inane, redundant qualification to make about any work of art. All exquisitely observed, technically proficient pictures might be regarded as beautiful; meaning that any fictional section of a museum dedicated to 'beauty' might well go on forever, with gallery after gallery filled with a parade of chocolate-box pretty idylls or tastefully composed confections. As the default, lowest-common denominator of a response, the word is little more than something platitudinous to say about a painting. It could also be a pernicious pursuit, one that attempts to hoodwink the audience through falsely flattering portrayals that are opposed to the art of honesty or reality that we encountered in a previous chapter. By these vague standards, beauty could be regarded as a generic, dismissive and reductive term, rather than anything beneficial or laudatory to uphold in art.

However, as one of art's great maxims, beauty is so fundamental to art history, humanity and our abiding value systems as to be impervious to the threat of actual extinction, much like the act of painting itself, which has supposedly been killed off numerous times, only to be resurrected with metronomic regularity. If the Old Masters seem to suffer from a surfeit of beauty, there is still an upper echelon of poise, elegance, purity and exquisiteness to be found beyond mere lip-service loveliness. Each age has its own rejuvenated and reinvented form of beauty, one that is more enigmatic, seductive and heady than the last.

What I am proposing to focus on, then, is not a generic, run-of-the-mill idea of beauty, but both this higher form of elegiac, indescribable subtlety – the superlative notions of perfection and impossible beauty



in art – as well as a more complex kind of unorthodox beauty, one that challenges the norms and reinterprets what we think of as beautiful.

Even if we are led to believe that it is a matter of subjective opinion – that beauty is in the eye of the beholder – there are some works that are indisputably, perennially beautiful. Leonardo da Vinci is renowned, among his many other talents, for capturing something of the essence of feminine beauty in sitters such as the *Mona Lisa* and *La Belle Ferronnière*, as well as the captivating *Lady with an Ermine* (1490).

These women's expressions are all nuanced and inscrutable, existing somewhere between aloofness, concentration and satisfaction, suggesting simultaneously a coquettish pleasure and a fierce disdain for whoever is in front of them. The strange sight of a weasel being caressed by the *Lady with an Ermine* (or more correctly in its white winter coat, it should be described as a stoat) represents both a painterly visual pun (the Greek word *galée* is close to the surname of the subject, Cecilia Gallerani) and a symbol of purity and moderation. More astonishing even than the creature's lifelikeness is its physical likeness and bodily reflection of her, through the stoat's elegant but muscular, twisting posture.

As Leonardo was such an advocate of the underlying mathematical precision connecting and governing all living things, his artistic beauty could be understood as a mastery of the structural qualities of the physical world – such as the use of the Vitruvian Golden Section or his own system of *De Divina Proportione* as he called it. Yet this would not account for the sensitivity with which he has depicted his *Lady with an Ermine*. In fact, studies showing that there are the artist's fingerprints beneath Gallerani's brow and on the animal's fur would suggest that it was not a rational pursuit for him, rather an activity and a subject that he cared deeply enough about to caress and mould with his own hands.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1485. Uffizi, Florence

Previous Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*, c.1490. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow

Chapter 5

Art as Horror

There are moments when even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell.
Edgar Allan Poe, 1844

As we have just seen, a common conception of art's true purpose revolves around its ability to portray beauty, or else to lift the spirits, exalt the holy, or pay homage to kings. Yet many artists have long harnessed the power of images to shock, frighten, forewarn or fantasize. While some Old Masters could be bloodthirsty and provocative for the sake of grabbing an audience or gaining notoriety, other artists depicted horror as a means to probe the deepest and darkest corners of our collective psyche. There were those who went to the lengths of frequenting mental asylums or sketching decaying or decapitated bodies at the morgue in order to depict disease or death first hand. And, depending on which historical accounts you read or believe, there have been painters who themselves resorted to violence or harboured disturbing experiences, as further grist to their dark, artistic mills.

There can be few more gruesome sights than that of the central panel of the seven that make up the Isenheim Altarpiece, painted by Matthias Grünewald (properly known by the name Mathis Gothart Neithardt) from 1512–16. For his *Crucifixion*, the artist shows Jesus brutally nailed to a rudimentary cross, poorly fashioned from two roughly stripped beams of wood, the horizontal support bowing and bending under the tragic weight of its load. Neither is Jesus glorified in any way – his loincloth is a rag; his hands, fingers, feet and toes are mangled and contorted through sheer pain; while the sharp thorns seem to have dispersed from his crown and embedded themselves into his flesh, which has turned a nightmarish, gangrenous shade of yellow-green.

Although painted on the cusp of the Reformation and so at the juncture between the end of medieval, Germanic Gothic and the first



Matthias Grünewald,
The Isenheim Altarpiece,
c. 1512–16. Musée
d'Unterlinden, Colmar

Below Matthias Grünewald,
The Isenheim Altarpiece,
detail



Chapter 7

Art as Folly

Mix a little foolishness with your serious plans.
It is lovely to be silly at the right moment. *Horace, 20 BC*

An artist painting ridiculous sickly-sweet confections, carnivalesque cavalcades or grotesque caricatures can be accused of pandering to populism or being prone to flights of fancy. Such works are often considered no more than ornamentation, spoof or whimsy and are certainly not normally associated with the serious business of fine art. Yet when it comes to any Old Master collection or museum worth its salt, it is often these moments of levity, laughter or (whisper it) light entertainment that can elevate the gallery-going experience beyond that of a trudge of duty.

A titillating conversation piece, a slice of bawdy revelry or the classical equivalent of a rom-com should not be so readily dismissed. After all, the cultural impact of an accessible, quickly digested and easy-on-the-eye image can have lasting ripples. Take *The Laughing Cavalier* (1624) by Frans Hals, which has become a defining portrayal of mirth among the Old Masters, despite the fact that the swaggering sitter is merely smirking rather than breaking out into an uproarious guffaw. Hals painted many more jaunty portraits of laughter and merriment, including busty women of dubious moral standards, innkeepers, gurning drunks, lute players, cheeky children and a famous red-faced jester, painted in 1643 and dubbed *Pickled Herring*, likely due to his prodigious alcoholic intake. In all of these, what Hals captured with his breezy, swift brushstrokes was both the fleeting recognition of each individual's character or life force in that moment, as well as a specific, often jovial mood – many creasing up their features into laughter or else grinning in advance of a laugh. Such sparks of personality can leap across centuries, providing cheer while also connecting audiences with long-dead artists far quicker than any art historical text or symbolic considerations.



Frans Hals, *The Laughing Cavalier*, 1624. The Wallace Collection, London

Chapter 8

Art as Vision

The question is not what you look at, but what you see.
Henry David Thoreau, 1851

The history of art is littered with anomalies: artists who were out of their time, maybe ahead of it, perhaps even far behind it. These unique figures – rarely part of a recognised movement or a cultural zeitgeist – were often considered mad, bad or dangerous to know, but their radical contributions to art should not be reduced to the margins. Some of these artists provide shining beacons in dark times and light the way for future generations of artists. Whether these visionaries were obsessed by a private, fictional world or were able to tap into moments of extreme natural spectacle, they deserve their place in the pantheon.

That many of these artists – a longer list than is possible to illustrate here, to which I would surely add many others from previous chapters, including Bosch, Velázquez, Goya, Michelangelo and Rembrandt – did not fit the canon, so much as invent a new path all of their own. For that reason sometimes their legacy is disputed, if not now, then certainly during their lifetimes. More than artists these figures can be regarded as seers, soothsayers, magi or imagineers – engineers or pioneers of imaginative thinking and creation. Such intangible influence would not often translate into immediate success or understanding. For instance, William Blake – poet, spiritualist and prophet, as much as an artist – did not sit easily within academic circles and certainly never climbed the ranks in the same manner as his younger contemporaries, Turner and Constable. A self-confessed visionary, Blake claimed to have seen angels aged eight and conversed with ghosts not long after, but it is equally facile to assume his art was simply the result of a feverish and troubled mind.

His vision stemmed very much from ancient precursors and the Old Masters, even if his work neither resembled nor paid direct homage to them. Rather he was an old soul trapped in a swiftly modernising world.



William Blake, *A Small Book of Designs / The First Book of Urizen*, 1794. British Museum, London

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