Visual Literacy Through Art History:
A Workbook for Developing Skills That Transfer Beyond the Art Room

By Eric Gibbons

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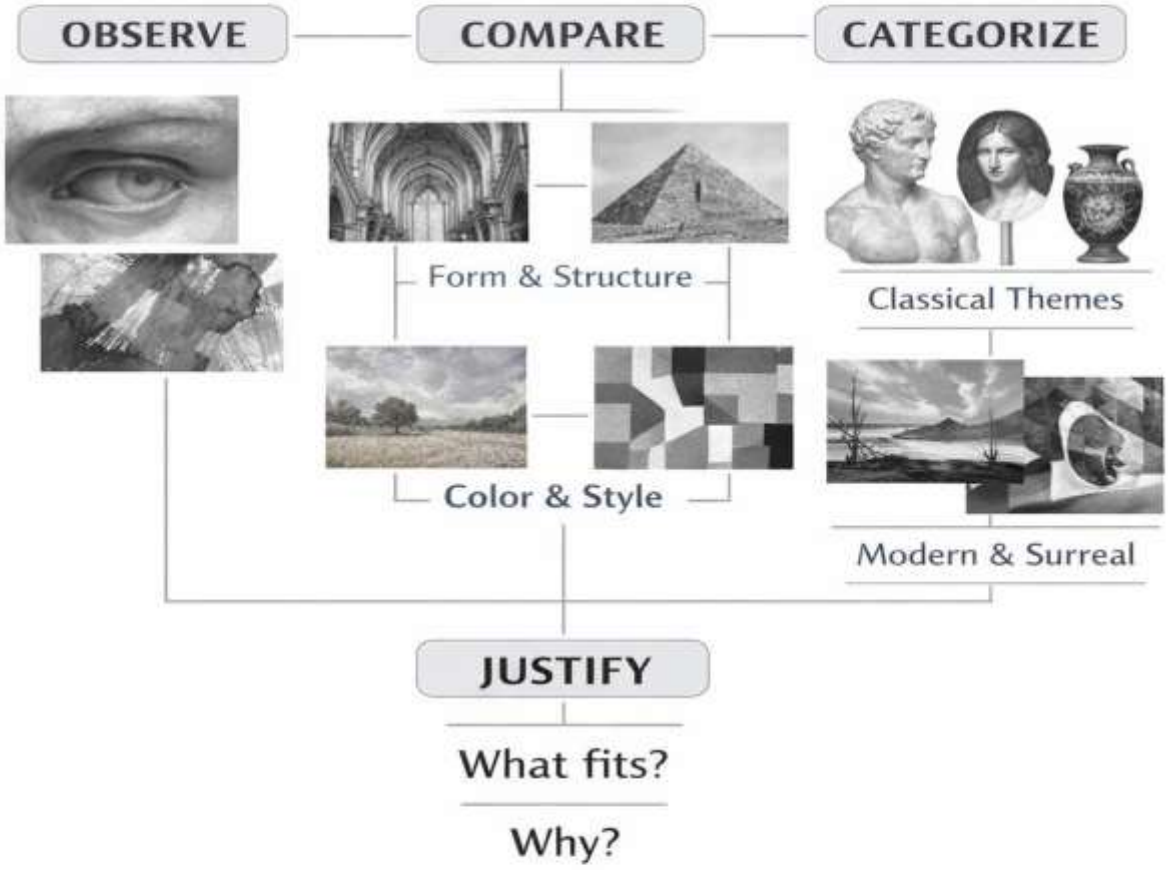
HOW WE SEE AND ANALYZE ART



Visual Literacy Through Art History offers a holistic, skills-driven approach to teaching art history that centers on visual reasoning rather than memorization. Students are guided to analyze what they see, recognize recurring visual patterns, and categorize artworks based on evidence—mirroring how artists, historians, and designers actually think. Instead of treating art movements as lists of facts to be recalled, this approach treats them as visual languages that can be decoded, compared, and applied to unfamiliar images.

This methodology is grounded in research on visual literacy and concept-based learning, which emphasizes that understanding relationships, patterns, and structures leads to deeper and more enduring learning than rote recall. Cognitive science and transfer research further suggest that students retain and apply knowledge more effectively when they practice reasoning across varied examples. By repeatedly asking students to justify why an artwork fits a particular style, the approach strengthens analytical thinking, metacognition, and long-term retention.

Most importantly, this approach reframes art history as a transferable way of thinking rather than a closed body of information. The skills students develop—observation, categorization, comparison, and visual argumentation—extend beyond the art room into other academic disciplines and everyday visual environments. In a world saturated with images, teaching students how to see with intention is not only relevant—it is essential. (**See References***)

This book organizes movement in art history into chunks that the instructor can print and share with students to build their knowledge base in a way that best dovetails into their mode of teaching. Your purchase gives you permission to make copies for your students. See the copyright statement for details. Download a PDF of color images for classroom use at: www.firehousepublications.com/vlpdf.html

***Professional References**

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Western Art History Flowchart

www.FirehousePublications.com

START

Is there a subject?
Can you see "stuff" that you recognize?

No

Does it have a very precise and/or almost hypnotic use of line, shape, or color?

Yes

Op Art

No

Is there very little going on in the image, something very simple?

Yes

Minimalism

No

Abstract Expressionism

Yes

Are people wearing togas? (Roman robes or capes) If you see nudes, are they related to mythology or the Bible?

Yes

Is the perspective clearly "wrong" OR do the figures seem odd, like babies that look like old men, or the proportions and/or scale is "wrong" when you examine the figures?

Both are "wrong"

Byzantine

Both styles predate the Renaissance. Artists had not yet discovered perspective. Byzantine artists didn't fully understand human proportions yet.

Just Perspective is "wrong"

Gothic*

*Some gothic art is secular

No

Are the poses rather relaxed, or are they more dramatic and "staged"?

Relaxed

Italian Renaissance

Dramatic

Neoclassical

No

Does it show very rich or royal people in Cinderella style dress frivolously playing or being naughty? Do even the clothes and trees look rich and fluffy?

Yes

Rococo

No

Is it very old looking but fairly realistic with "regular" people of that time? Would you say the clothing looks like it is from a Three Musketeers Movie or Pirates of the Caribbean?

Yes

Is the background very dark, and the people look like the artist used spotlights to highlight portions of the image, like the face(s) and select objects?

Yes

Baroque

No

Northern Renaissance

No

Do you see things from popular culture, everyday life, or regular common items with bold color that might not normally be considered art?

Yes

Did it take effort to make?
(The artist had to draw it, paint it, or print it with some process.)

Yes

Pop Art

No

Dada

No

Does it have a poster-like look?
Do the figures and elements seem to have a design-like feel?
(Flat-ish colors, maybe words, text, and/or obvious outlines)

Yes

Do the design elements look like ribbons of smoke or floral based patterns that are too "perfect" and organized?

Yes

Art Nouveau*

*Art Nouveau has a strong sense of flow like water but is highly organized and decorative.

No

Art Deco**

**Art Deco is influenced by Egyptian art and designs look streamlined. The Emerald City in The Wizard of Oz movie is very Art Deco.

No

Is there anything dream-like, impossible, or magical happening?

Yes

Surrealism

No

Is there a strong sense of emotion in the work, **and** do the colors, shapes, or textures help make the emotions stronger? **OR** Does it have a very unusual use of shape, color, form that almost hides the subject?

Yes

Do you see a strong use of geometric shapes or does the art seem to have a shattered look?

Yes

Cubism

Cubism is a kind of Expressionism, but it came first and influenced many other styles. It was started by Pablo Picasso!

No

Expressionism

No

Is the paint rather thick, with obvious brushwork, or boldly dotted, **and** could it have been painted from observation?

Yes

Are the colors fairly accurate, OR are they completely wrong or even opposite like a red tree or orange water?

Fairly Accurate

How accurate are the colors and shapes? Do they feel "right" or might the artist be trying to express a bit more with the artwork on an emotional level?

Accurate

Impressionism

Emotional

Post-Impressionism

Wrong

Fauvism

No

Do you see people interacting with nature like farming, hunting, hiking?

Yes

Could they be slaves, are they unhappy laborers, **OR** are they looking out at the viewers of the artwork?

Yes

Realism

No

Romanticism

No

Is it dramatic with a battle where people hide in the landscape, or showing nature overwhelming people? **OR** is it exotic looking with themes from the Middle East or India?

Yes

Romanticism

No

Does the artwork look like an artist was trying to capture a moment like a photographer might?
(Cameras challenged some artists to work more realistically.)

Yes

Does it look so real it's hard to believe someone painted, drew or sculpted it?

Yes

Photo-realism

Hyperrealism: is a style that is so realistic and detailed it is hard to imagine someone made it.

No

Realism

No

Try Again...
but it might not be on this list.
There are hundreds of
different styles of art.
These are just some
major ones.

Two Approaches:

For introductory courses we focus on the major movements in art history from the Renaissance through Pop Art. These have been selected because they are easy to differentiate but also see how one leads into the next. Most art from the 1400s to now can be placed into one of these major styles of art.

- Renaissance
- Baroque
- Rococo
- Neoclassical
- Romanticism
- Realism
- Impressionism
- Cubism
- Expressionism
- Abstract Expressionism
- Dada
- Surrealism
- Pop Art

These schools of art are meant for a deeper dive into art history with a bit more visual differentiation but still do not overwhelm students:

- Byzantine
- Gothic
- Northern Renaissance
- Art Nouveau
- Art Deco
- Fauvism
- Minimalism
- Op Art
- Conceptual Art – (new/now)

What about non-western art?

If the class is one where we make art then I will include lessons where students explore their own cultural backgrounds to make authentic works of art to emulate the cultures present in my current cohort of students. This book will include some important works of international art.

As I teach, I am also cognizant that much of art history is taught through the lens of "old white guys." For this reason, I am careful to curate diverse and inclusive examples in my teaching. Some important non-western artworks are referenced in the end of this book as well as those by underrepresented communities. It is not a comprehensive list.

Resources:

artedguru.com/home/the-art-history-game
artedguru.com/home/my-approach-to-art-history
https://bit.ly/SchoolsOfArt

This last URL a playlist that coordinates with this book. My videos are overgeneralizations of the major schools of art in Western Art History. They are meant for a young audience with short introductions to help viewers understand the visual cues and hallmarks within these major "schools of art." There are hundreds of named styles of art – new contemporary ones being named right now, and many I choose not to cover like Romanesque, Mannerism, or Naïve Art. I feel that this list encompasses enough to give students a broad introductory exposure to art history.

Schools of Art Synopsys

Video Support: https://bit.ly/SchoolsOfArt

Byzantine Art – c 330–1453
Almost always religious often with gold backgrounds. Perspective and human proportions were often intentionally incorrect. The art was not meant to be realistic, but symbolic, and spiritual Icons were common.

Gothic Art – c 1140–1500
Came before the Renaissance. Some early attempts at realism appear but perspective was not yet understood. Figures are often tall and elegant with relaxed poses. Art could be religious or secular.

Renaissance (*Italian*) – c 1400–1600
Renaissance means rebirth. Artists studied Greek/Roman and Biblical themes. Perspective was used to create the illusion of 3D space. Human figures look natural, balanced, and calm.

Northern Renaissance – c 1430–1600
Similar realism to the Renaissance but focused more on everyday life than ancient myths. Artists showed great detail textures and realism using regular people as models.

Baroque – c 1600–1750
Art that feels dramatic, theatrical, and emotional. Scenes often look like they are lit by a spotlight. Strong contrasts between light and dark are common. Clothing and action feel intense and energetic.

Rococo – c 1700–1775
Light playful and decorative. Art often shows wealthy people relaxing playing or flirting. Everything feels fancy, sweet, and overdecorated. Rococo is like Baroque with extra sugar.

Neoclassical – c 1750–1820
A reaction against Rococo. Art is serious, orderly, and structured. Inspired by ancient Greece and Rome. Many government buildings in Washington DC use this style.

Romanticism – c 1800–1850
It's not about "romance," it's about man and nature. The subjects focus on emotion, imagination, and the natural world. People are often shown small compared to powerful nature. Nature can be beautiful, dangerous, or dramatic.

Realism – c 1840–1880
Artists showed life as it really was including hard or uncomfortable truths. Scenes might show work poverty or social issues. Detail was important because photography was not yet common, but a threat to their livelihood.

Impressionism – c 1867–1886
Focused on light, color, and the moment. Paint is often thick and brushstrokes are visible. Artists painted from observation, often outdoors. Their texture and color differentiated their work from more common and cheaper photography.

Art Nouveau – c 1890–1910
Decorative style with flowing curving lines often inspired by plants, smoke, or hair. Commonly used in posters architecture and design.

Expressionism – c 1905–1930
Artists changed art elements like colors, shapes, textures, and forms to show strong emotions. Subjects exist but may look distorted or exaggerated. Abstraction may be slight or extreme.

Fauvism – c 1905–1908
Fauvism means "wild beasts." Artists used bright unrealistic colors for emotional impact rather than accuracy. The work looks like Impressionism but with all the *wrong* colors and sometimes broken lines.

Cubism – c 1907–1914
Objects are broken into geometric shapes and shown from multiple viewpoints at once. The subject is still present but looks fractured or shattered. Pablo Picasso is credited with its invention.

Dada – c 1916–1924
Anti-art movement that mocked traditional art. Artists used found objects, chance, and humor. The idea and the audience reactions mattered more than skill.

Surrealism – c 1924–1950
Dreamlike, strange, or impossible scenes. Often painted highly realistically. Inspired by dreams and the unconscious mind.

Art Deco – c 1920–1940
Sleek, modern, and streamlined. Designs suggest speed progress and technology. Common in buildings, fashion, and objects.

Abstract Expressionism – c 1943–1965
No recognizable subject. Art focuses on emotion, movement, recording the bodies' movements, or the act of creating itself. Non-objective art.

Pop Art – c 1955–1970
Inspired by popular culture such as advertising, celebrities, comics, and products. Bold colors, lines, and simple imagery are common.

Minimalism – c 1960–1975
Extremely simple art using basic shapes, limited colors, and/or repetition. The artwork avoids emotion, symbolism, and personal expression. "Do the most with the least amount of materials."

Op Art – c 1960–1970
Uses patterns, shapes, lines, and/or colors to create optical illusions of movement or vibration. It usually has no subject. It plays with **op**tics or how they eye perceives, hence the name.

Conceptual Art – c 1965–present
The idea is more important than how the art looks. The artwork may be simple, temporary, or even written instructions. It can feel like a documentary or instructional. Viewer participation may be required and the idea could exist without the art.

Byzantine Art (c. **330~1450)**

Space & Composition

✓ Space appears flat or shallow, not deep

✓ No single vanishing point is used

✓ Figures may seem to float rather than stand on ground

✓ Composition feels frontal and formal

Human Figures

✓ Bodies are elongated or stylized

✓ Anatomical accuracy is not a priority

✓ Figures face forward or are rigidly posed

✓ Little or no nudity is present

✓ Figures feel symbolic rather than physical

Emotion & Expression

✓ Facial expressions are solemn or emotionless

✓ Eye contact with the viewer is common

Style & Technique

✓ Little to no realistic light and shadow

✓ Gold backgrounds or surfaces

✓ Drapery is patterned or linear, not body-revealing

✓ Outlines are emphasized

✓ Materials look symbolic rather than observed from life

Subject Matter & Purpose

✓ Christian religious figures dominate

✓ Figures are arranged hierarchically (important figures appear larger)

✓ Imagery is meant for devotion, not realism

Lots of gold, hands and features feel symbolic, stylized, and lack realism.

Byzantine Madonna and Child by Master of St Cecilia c 1290 from the Getty Center Collection

More gold, poor perspective. Figures feel too tall, and are all the same height.

Byzantine The Presentation in the Temple c 1200 from the collection Metropolitan Museum of Art

Features lack an understanding of biology, too symmetrical. Idealized.

Head of a Woman c 400 from the collection Metropolitan Museum of Art

Too symmetrical, symbolic features. Mosaics are common in this period.

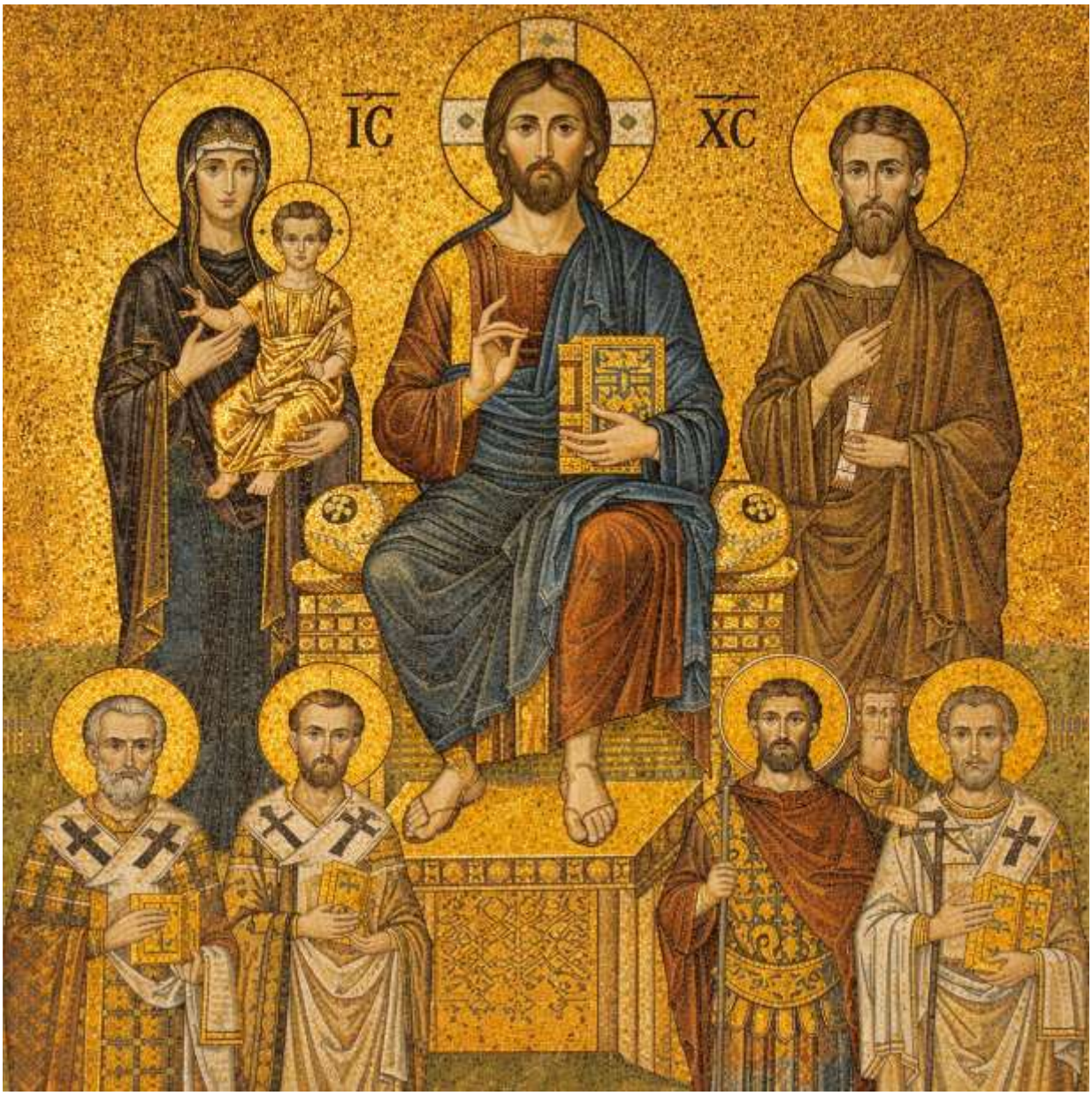
Fragment of a Floor Mosaic with a Personification of Ktisis c 500 from the collection Metropolitan Museum of Art

More gold, unrealistic hands and features. Babies often look like "ugly."

Icon of the Virgin and Child Hodegetria Type c 1200 from the collection Metropolitan Museum of Art

Tall skinny figures of equal height with a gold background.

Emperor Justinian and Members of His Court c 547 from the collection Basilica of San Vitale Ravenna



The Byzantine image above was made by AI based on our checklist.

What did it get right? _____

_____

_____

What did it get wrong? _____

_____

_____

Byzantine-Based Art Explorations

- Figure or self as a saint, angel, or biblical character
- Self-portrait in this style with the use of gold and iconography of the time
- Take a modern image and redesign it with this old style
- Do a painting of someone you admire in this style with symbols if their importance
- Create a movie poster in this style

Golden: Create a painting of a figure or yourself as a saint, angel, or biblical character. Incorporate gold into the background and as a decorative element. See examples of Byzantine work and reference them as you sketch and work. These images often incorporated objects that acted as symbols within the paintings (Like a dove to mean peace). Often these works were painted on wood boards.

Portrait: After reviewing works in this style consider a non-religious image that fits in with the style. Create a painting of yourself, friend, family member, or someone you admire. Consider the use of gold and iconography/symbols of the time. Look at how Byzantine artists painted figures and proportions.

Mash-Up: Take a modern image and redesign it with this old style. How would a Star Wars movie poster look like if it was created in the year 1000?

Emulate: Create a painting of a still life, collection of objects, or scene in your room but use the style of this era. Perspective and human proportions should be convincingly wrong and naive.

Narrative Icon: After reviewing Byzantine narrative artworks, create a single image that tells a story by showing multiple moments in time within one composition. Figures may appear more than once to represent different events in the story. Use flat space, symbolic scale, and simplified forms rather than realistic perspective. Gold or pattern may be used to unify the background. Focus on how placement, repetition, and symbols help the viewer understand the story without relying on realism.

Symbol System: Byzantine artists often communicated meaning through symbols rather than realistic scenes. Create a panel inspired by this tradition using objects, patterns, and simplified imagery to represent an idea, value, or personal identity. Figures are optional. The space does not need to feel realistic and may appear flat or decorative. Use hierarchy, scale, and repeated motifs to show importance. Gold or patterned backgrounds may be used to emphasize meaning rather than depth.

Gothic Art (c. **1140~1500)**

Space & Composition

✓ Space begins to feel deeper but is not fully realistic

✓ Overlapping figures suggest depth

✓ Architecture frames the scene vertically

✓ Compositions can feel crowded

✓ The scene feels energetic or emotionally charged

Human Figures

✓ Figures are elongated and slender

✓ Bodies are more natural but not realistic

✓ Poses show movement or gesture

✓ Cloth flows with rhythmic, curving lines

Emotion & Expression

✓ Expressions show emotion or suffering

✓ Gestures are dramatic or expressive

✓ Figures interact emotionally

✓ Emotion feels more human and personal

Style & Technique

✓ Lines are emphasized over shading

✓ Light is symbolic rather than naturalistic

✓ Decorative patterning is common

✓ Gold backgrounds are less dominant

✓ Details are intricate and visually rich

Subject Matter & Purpose

✓ Christian narratives dominate imagery

✓ Scenes focus on storytelling

✓ Architecture (cathedrals, pointed arches) influences visual design

Paris's Notre-Dame Cathedral is an iconic masterpiece of French Gothic architecture

Figures that look like columns are common and often paired with architecture like in Natre-Dame's pillars and entryways

Column Statue of a King French c1150 Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

Note the exaggerated expressions but more clearly realistic style.

Pietà Carlo Crivelli Italian 1476 Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

The use of gold persists, but the figures are more realistic and proportional.

Virgin and Child Follower of Rogier van der Weyden 1480–90 Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

Though the perspective is "off" the figure proportions are clearly "better."

Totila before Saint Benedict Benozzo Gozzoli 1460s Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

Note the elongation of the composition.

Virgin and Child in a Niche Workshop of Jan van Eyck Netherlandish c 1440 Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Gothic image above was made by AI based on our checklist.

What did it get right? _____

_____

_____

What did it get wrong? _____

_____

_____

Gothic-Based Art Explorations

- An exploration of Medieval Art
- Image of yourself in a Medieval scene but doing what you might
- A formal image of yourself with your most prized possessions
- Design your own castle, tapestry, or suit of armor

Be Scene/Seen: After looking at examples of ancient Gothic art, create your own painting or sculpture in this style. Consider including yourself and what you like to do but in this older style. Human proportions should be fairly accurate, but perspective does not need to be since they had not yet understood it well.

Pride Portrait: During the Medieval period, merchants were able to buy things for themselves, it was not just the royalty that could buy art. Some of these rich folks would commission a painting of themselves that included their most prized possessions as a way to show off their success. Do a self-portrait of yourself but surround yourself with items to show off your skills, awards, and talents.

Going Medieval: Design your own castle, tapestry, banner, or suit of armor. Include symbols tied to your family name, heritage, or ancestry. Look up heraldry, coats of arms, and other resources to include in your imagery. National flower, animal, bird, etc.

Sacred Story: During the Gothic period, art was often used to teach stories to people who could not read. Create an image that tells a religious, mythological, or moral story using expressive figures and dramatic gestures. Architecture, arches, or stained-glass–like framing may be included. Figures should show emotion through pose and facial expression. Space may feel crowded and vertical rather than realistic.

Illuminated Page: Medieval artists often decorated books by hand with detailed borders, symbols, and stylized lettering. Create an illuminated manuscript–style page that includes a short quote, poem, or phrase. Decorate the page with patterns, borders, figures, and symbolic imagery inspired by Gothic manuscripts. Focus on craftsmanship, repetition, and decorative detail rather than realism.

Gothic Everyday Life: Most medieval art shows religious or noble figures, but everyday life still existed. Create an artwork that shows people working, celebrating, traveling, or learning during the Gothic period. Clothing, tools, and settings should reflect the time period. Figures should be proportionally believable, but space and depth may feel flattened or inconsistent, as seen in Gothic art.

(*Italian*) **Renaissance (**c. **1400~1600)**

Space & Composition

✓ The space looks deep and believable

✓ Lines/architecture use a vanishing point

✓ Figures appear grounded, not floating

✓ Balanced or symmetrical compositions

✓ The scene feels calm and stable

Human Figures

✓ Bodies look anatomically correct

✓ Figures are idealized but still realistic

✓ Poses feel natural and controlled

✓ Nudity (if present) appears dignified

✓ Figures have weight and volume

Emotion & Expression

✓ Facial expressions are calm or thoughtful

✓ Emotion is restrained

✓ Figures seem absorbed in thought, dialogue, or purpose

Style & Technique

✓ Light/shadow on forms is realistic

✓ Drapery follows the body naturally

✓ Surfaces (skin, stone, fabric) realistic

✓ Brushwork is controlled

Subject Matter & Influence

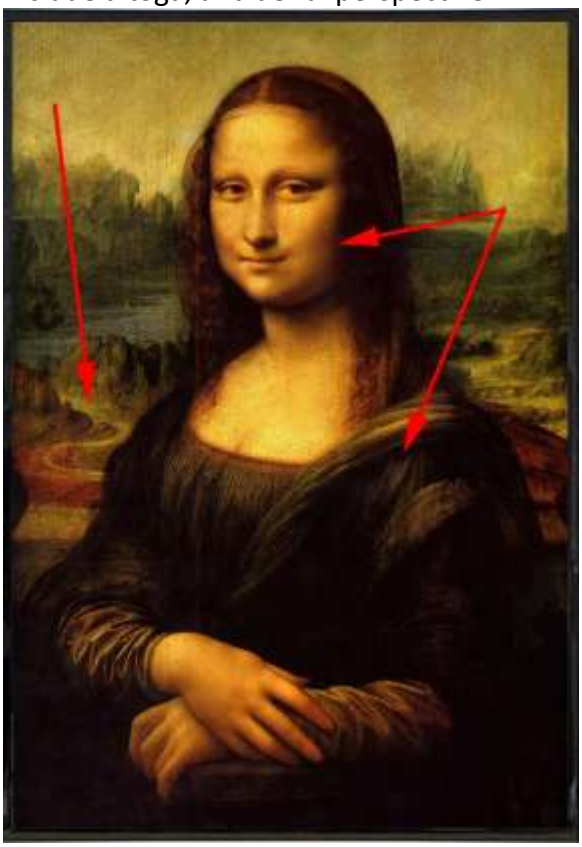
✓ Classical Greek/Roman elements appear

✓ Mythology or Christian themes are presented humanistically

✓ The scene feels ordered, rational, and idealized

****Italian Renaissance** = ideal, classical, mathematical, heroic

Images are realistic, anatomically correct, include a toga, and aerial perspective.



Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci c 1503 from the Louvre collection Paris France

Both perspective and figurative anatomy is correct. Figures are idealized and relaxed.

Renaissance The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo c 1512 from the Sistine Chapel Vatican City

This sculpture is relaxed, a biblical theme (Moses), and wears a toga.

Moses by Michelangelo c 1515 from San Pietro in Vincoli Rome

This famous painting features one point perspective, figures in togas, and a biblical theme. It was also a “failed” experiment of tempera and oil on dry plaster. Renaissance artists, like Leonardo, experimented with many new materials and techniques.

The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci c 1498 from Santa Maria delle Grazie refectory Milan

Ezekiel has similar symbols to Zeus in this image. Mythology and biblical themes are common in the Renaissance.

The Vision of Ezekiel by Raphael c 1518 from the Pitti Palace collection Florence

Venus is a mythological figure. The use of perspective and textiles that hint at togas are present.

The Birth of Venus by Botticelli c 1485 from the Uffizi collection Florence

Northern Renaissance Art (c. **1430–1600)**

Space & Composition

✓ Space is believable but not always precise

✓ Interiors are common and richly detailed

✓ Foreground and background details compete for attention

Human Figures

✓ Figures are more realistic than idealized

✓ Faces show individuality, age, and imperfection

✓ People feel ordinary rather than heroic

Emotion & Expression

✓ Expressions feel inward and private

✓ Figures often appear absorbed in thought

✓ Scenes feel personal rather than grand

Style & Technique

✓ Surfaces are rendered with high detail

✓ Textures (glass, hair, fabric) are refined

✓ Brushwork is nearly invisible

Symbolism & Meaning

✓ Everyday objects carry symbolic meaning

✓ Religious themes appear in domestic settings

Subject Matter & Cultural Context

✓ Christian themes remain central

✓ Portraiture is common

✓ Middle-class life is frequently depicted

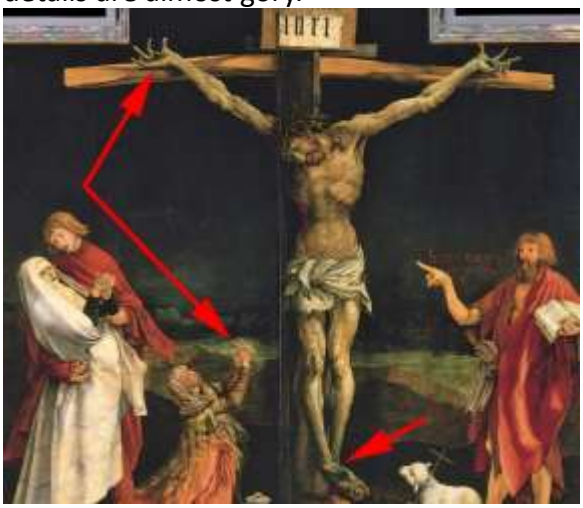
✓ Classical mythology is rare

****Northern Renaissance** = observed, detailed, symbolic, domestic

Figures are highly realistic, noted details are highly accurate in texture. Drapery resembles togas, but the image is secular.

Arnolfini Portrait by Jan Van Eyck 1434 National Gallery London

This crucifixion is more gruesome, not as “pretty” as Italian Renaissance work. These details are almost gory.



Grünewald Crucifixion panel (detail) Isenheim Altarpiece Musée Unterlinden France

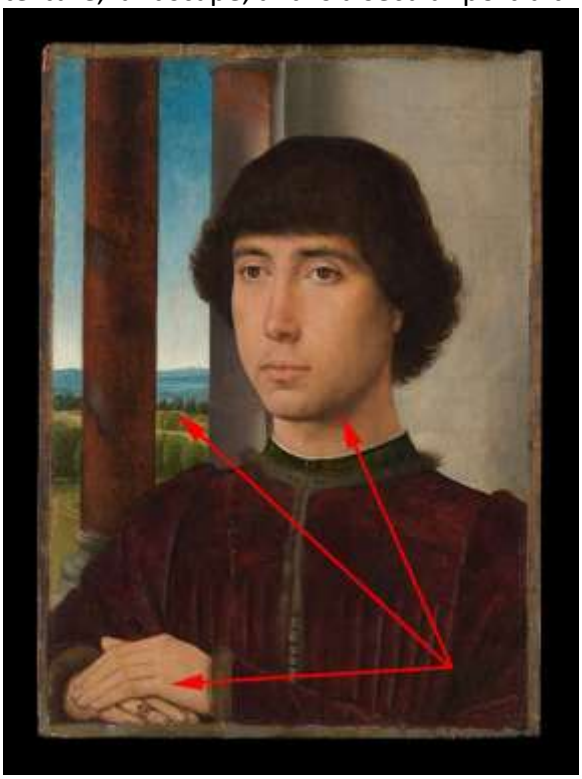
Note the high level of detail in the textures, the overt use of the artist's signature. The hint of perspective is here too.

Portrait of a Carthusian Petrus Christus
Netherlandish 1446 Metropolitan Museum of Art

Pieter is known for his paintings of everyday people. Sometimes there is humor in the details. Perspective feels understood and correct, and this is a more secular image.

The Harvesters Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Netherlandish 1565 Metropolitan Museum of Art

This painting has a strong understanding of texture, landscape, and is a secular portrait.



Portrait of a Young Man Hans Memling
Netherlandish ca 1476 Metropolitan Museum of Art

This secular image includes symbols of the men's wealth, status, and a hidden skull.

The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve 1533
National Gally of London.

The Renaissance image above was made by AI based on our checklist.

What did it get right? _____

_____

_____

What did it get wrong? _____

_____

_____

Renaissance-Based Art Explorations

- Grid portraits
- Figure drawing
- Perspective drawing
- Images with a religious or myth theme
- Still life paintings or drawings

Portraits: Students create portraits in several modes before completing a final. First without any instruction, then as blind drawings, then with exposure to proper proportions, and finally with a grid. Students are assigned to bring in a photo of a family member or figure they admire.

Grid Drawings: Using a source image, students create a grid on plastic to cover the image, then a similar but larger grid on paper or canvas to transfer the image square by square. This method results in highly realistic and properly scaled images. Grids can be made with string on a frame as well to work from live subjects or a still life.

Drawings from Observation: When weather permits, it is nice to go outside and draw a scene from nature. In spring-time it is fun to tag a branch when budding with loosely tied yarn, and redrawing that branch as a bloom grows. Da Vinci is a good example.

Flower Dissection: Drawing and labeling with research. Students can gather flowers or bring some in, maybe a donation of old flowers from a flower shop. Students dissect flowers with an X-Acto knife and draw from observation. Later, within the library or computer lab, students label the parts that they have observed. Enlarge sketches and use as references for larger paintings like Georgia O'Keeffe.

Drawings of Decay: Students can gather soft tissue plants, even lettuce can work and do one sketch a day of the decaying process. This could even be done in the form of a flipbook. Sketches can also follow the various color changes observed in the plant. I would suggest this as a five-minute sketch at the beginning of each class while doing another project. Sketches can later be more fully completed.

Figure Drawing: Using peers as clothed models in classical poses, students can do drawings in available media as short poses or longer more refined poses.

Perspective Drawing: Formally developed in the Renaissance, this can be the focus of a project in one, two, three, or four point perspective depending on the student's level of ability. These can be based on real environments like school hallways or images from photos students take of their room, home, or places they have visited.

Images With a Religious or Myth Theme: Students can compose an image with a religious or mythological theme to align with the ideals of the renaissance. Poses should be relaxed and natural. Simple toga drapery can be used in costuming if that is desired. A Renaissance painting could be re-done with contemporary models as well.

Still Life: Paintings or drawings of still lives were popular in the Renaissance, and always done from observation. Students can gather items that have personal significance and create a personal still life that has an underlying message.

Baroque Art (c. **1600s~1750)**

Space & Composition

✓ Compositions feel dynamic and asymmetrical (Staged)

✓ Figures break into the viewer's space

✓ The scene feels theatrical and immersive

✓ Feels like a snapshot in time

Human Figures

✓ Bodies are muscular and well modeled

✓ Figures twist, reach, or strain dramatically

✓ Poses capture action rather than calm

✓ Imperfections and age may be visible

✓ *Pirates of the Caribbean* clothing

Emotion & Expression

✓ Emotions are intense and exaggerated

✓ Portraits with dramatic lighting

✓ Gestures are bold and staged

Style & Technique

✓ Strong contrasts of light and dark (chiaroscuro / tenebrism)

✓ Light directs attention to the main action

✓ Movement is emphasized through light, gesture, and drapery

✓ Brushwork may be visible and energetic

Subject Matter & Purpose

✓ Religious scenes are emotional

✓ Mythology is presented with drama

✓ Scenes emphasize miracles, martyrdom, or climactic action

✓ The overall effect feels theatrical, powerful, and immersive

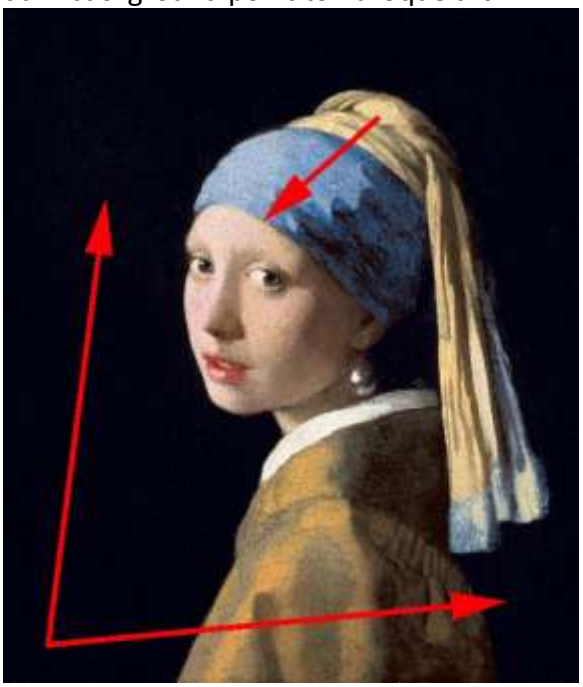
There seems to be a spotlight on the face and a very dark background.

Self Portrait Rembrandt 1659 National Gallery of Art Washington DC

Dramatically "staged" image with the action in spotlight. Clothing feels like *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Three Musketeers*. Figures are not as idealized. You will see "ugly" faces.

Judith Beheading Holofernes by Caravaggio c1599 Galleria Nazionale dArte Antica Palazzo Barberini Rome

Spotlight on the face and the dramatically dark background point to Baroque art.



Baroque Girl with a Pearl Earring by Johannes Vermeer c1665 Mauritshuis The Hague

Caravaggio hides the action in shadow as the young man is being cheated on in cards. The action feels staged, and the dramatic lighting fits the Baroque style.

The Cardsharps by Caravaggio c1594 Kimbell Art Museum Fort Worth TX

Note the dark background and the staging. The spotlight controls the composition. Imperfections in faces are shown.

The Night Watch by Rembrandt c. 1642 Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Dramatic lighting with a dark background are shown. The figure is not idealized.

Old Woman Cutting Her Nails by Students of Rembrandt Dijck and Maes Dutch ca1655 Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Baroque image above was made by AI based on our checklist.

What did it get right? _____

_____

_____

What did it get wrong? _____

_____

_____

Baroque-Based Art Explorations

- Images using strong light and shadow
- Scenes filled with movement, drama, and emotion
- Artworks that feel theatrical or staged
- Portraits, still lives, and narratives inspired by the 1600s
- Illusions that pull the viewer into the scene

Chiaroscuro Study: Baroque artists used dramatic contrasts of light and dark to create mood and realism. Create a figure or still life using a strong single light source and deep shadows. Backgrounds should remain dark and simple so the light becomes the focus. Earth tones and muted colors were common during this period and should be considered.

Theatrical Genre Scene: Many Baroque artists painted scenes of everyday people that feel staged, as if part of a play. Create a scene showing people engaged in a moment of action or interaction. Figures should be expressive and caught mid-gesture. Costumes may be historical or modern, but the scene should feel dramatic and intentional rather than casual.

Expressive Portrait: Baroque portraits often focused on personality, mood, or status rather than ideal beauty. Create a portrait that uses lighting, pose, and facial expression to suggest character. Costuming or props may help tell the viewer who this person is or how they want to be seen. The lighting should guide attention to the face and hands.

Symbolic Still Life: Baroque still lives were carefully arranged and often included hidden meanings. Create a still life using objects that suggest wealth, time, knowledge, or personal values. Objects should overlap and be arranged to lead the viewer's eye through the composition. Use strong light, deep shadows, and attention to texture and detail.

Illusion and Space: Baroque artists were interested in pulling the viewer into the artwork. Create an image that uses dramatic angles, overlapping forms, or strong diagonals to suggest depth and movement. Figures or objects may extend toward the viewer or appear cropped by the edge of the composition. The goal is to make the scene feel active and immersive.

SAMPLE END

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