

Art Genres and Subjects

Please note, some of the links on this article may be out of date, but there will be similar examples online. This is a huge and comprehensive resource containing far more material than you will need. Start simply and add extra information about the areas which most interest you.

This article allows you to:

- define genres in art, give examples and be able to consider how and why they have been represented in particular ways
- define what is meant by subjects in art and art history and offer a range of examples
- describe the many different ways artists have interpreted subjects in art and art history, drawing on connections between their visual appearance and the contextual aspects of their production
- compare and contrast different works of art in different mediums but within the same genre or subject.

Genres

Genre means ‘type’ or ‘category’. Examples include ‘**still life**’, ‘**landscape**’, ‘**portrait**’ and ‘**history painting**’. However, genre can also refer to a specific type of painting known as ‘**genre painting**’, which depicts scenes from everyday life. There was a system for ranking art in terms of its cultural value known as the ‘**hierarchy of genres**’.

The knowledge of the hierarchy of genres is very important for the understanding of Western painting, as it provides insight into the scale and treatment of many works. The **subject** of a work might be something like ‘fruit’, ‘mountains’, ‘family group’ or ‘war’ and this might help to define the work’s genre. Some works fall into two or more genres, or between subjects and genres. This chapter from the book ‘*Thinking About Art*’ provides you with the knowledge and understanding to make these judgements, and the multiple placements of works will be made clear within the text.

The first chapter of *Thinking About Art* will enable you to compare and contrast works of art of a common genre, noting points of similarity and difference in relation to both formal and interpretational aspects of the works chosen. Formal aspects might include: composition, scale, use of colour and **tone**, depiction of light and space, technique and materials and degrees of finish and detail. Interpretational aspects might include: aesthetics (the branch of philosophy which relates to beauty and taste), **ideology** (a particular set of ideas or values related to certain social groups) or **iconography** (formal and symbolic elements in relation to their wider social and historical context).

Genre: history

History painting as a form of narrative or **istoria** (historical, biblical or **mythological** narrative) has been specified as the highest of achievements as far back as the **Renaissance**. Acts of human virtue and intellect by moral heroes, including those in Christian stories (the dominant religion in Europe), were placed at the top of what would become the hierarchy of genres. History paintings were usually large-scale works depicting a subject based on

classical history, literature or **mythology** from ancient Greece and Rome, a scene from the Bible, or real historical events.

History paintings were ideally suited to public spaces and large canvases. The scenes depicted were usually heroic or noble, the aim of these works being to elevate viewers' morals. It was important that they provided the opportunity to depict the human figure – often nude or partially nude – since this subject was believed to require the greatest artistic skill. From the fifteenth until the nineteenth century, these enactments of human virtue were placed at the top of what would become the hierarchy of genres, and as a result many artists aspired to be history painters.

Exploring the history genre further



- Simon Schama's documentary *The Power of Art*, 2006, examines Jacques-Louis David. Also available as a hardback book (Bodley Head, 2009).



- Visit the Khan Academy's [video on Masaccio](#). The link takes you to a 13-minute video talk about the painting *The Tribute Money* and many of the innovative formal elements of *The Tribute Money* that have contributed to the artist's fame.

Genre: portraiture

Portraits are, fundamentally, pictures of people. The genre includes **self-portraits**, group and individual portraits (these may be face only, head and shoulders or full length), and also includes sculptural portraits, including portrait busts, equestrian monuments and portraits of standing figures.

Portraiture dates back to ancient civilisations, but it emerged as an important discipline in its own right during the Renaissance, when the concept that man was made in God's image gave rise to the celebration of important figures and their individual achievements.

Commonly, portraits aimed to depict the external physical features and the character of a person, and provided an important motivation for patronage for centuries. Private images of less important people tended to be overlooked until the early twentieth century, by which time the hierarchy of genres had lost its significance.

Exploring the portrait genre further



- Works such as *From Zero to Hero*, 2002, by contemporary artists Amrit and Rabindra Singh, known as the Singh twins, use the language of Indian **miniature** painting in this postmodern group portrait of the celebrity Beckham family, although the examination of the family's personal attributes appears to be a satirical one. A full discussion of *From Zero to Hero*, including references to the postmodern blurring of the boundaries between sport and celebrity, can be found at [the artists' website](#).



- [Elizabeth](#), 1998, a film starring Cate Blanchett, looks at Queen Elizabeth I's early life. She was declared illegitimate aged three, accused of treason aged 21 and crowned queen of England aged 25. The [second instalment](#), from the same director, Shekhar Kapur, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, 2007, focuses on the last years of her reign and a series of crises, including the Spanish Armada.



- Visit <http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/> for information about life during the Elizabethan period.



- Carola Hicks, *Girl in a Green Gown: The History and Mystery of the Arnolfini Portrait* (Vintage, 2012). This book is a must-read if Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* is to be taken into the AQA examination as an example. It is dedicated to exploring every facet of the artist's most famous work.
- Craig Harbison, 'Sexuality and Social Standing in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Double Portrait' (*Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1990).
- Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Its Origin and Character* (Harvard University Press, 1953, pp. 202–203).
- Margaret D. Carroll, 'In the Name of God and Profit: Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*' (*Representations*, No. 44, 1993).
- Lorne Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools* (National Gallery, 1998).
- Hayden Herrera's biography *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (Harper Perennial, reprinted 2002), is a recommended read.
- For an exquisitely detailed and compelling account of Dürer's *Self-Portrait*, read Laura Cumming, *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits* (HarperPress, 2009).



- Watch the film [Frida](#), 2003, directed by Julie Taymor. Actress Salma Hayek plays the role of the tempestuous Kahlo.
- For an aesthetically creative biopic into the scandalous life of Caravaggio, and an insight into the creation of some of his most famous works, watch [Caravaggio](#), directed by Derek Jarman (1986, cert. 18).
- For a further visual sense of tenebrism and psychological darkness, this time in Restoration England, watch [The Libertine](#), starring Johnny Depp (2005, cert. 18). The artistic use of light, colour and composition in both of these films mirror those used in seventeenth-century paintings.
- Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, 2006, contains information on Caravaggio. Also available as a hardback book (Bodley Head, 2009).
- Andrew Graham-Dixon's *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane* (Allen Lane, 2010).

Genre: genre

As well as meaning ‘type’, the word ‘genre’ also refers to scenes depicting the everyday life of people. Thus, in accordance with the ‘hierarchy of genres’, the **genre-genre** suffered a low ranking, following the history and portraiture genres previously examined.

Genre paintings often provided a counterpoint to the more serious and academic history genre. Genre works are a category of art that tends to depict realistically scenes of everyday life such as street scenes, markets or domestic interiors. Genre scenes characteristically feature figures and are distinguished from other genres such as portrait and history on account of their depiction of ordinary people and unidentifiable people.

Exploring the genre of genre further



- The [Tate website](#) has a discussion of the objects in William Maw Egley’s *Omnibus Life in London*, 1859.



- For an insight into the life and works of Vermeer, watch [The Girl With a Pearl Earring](#), 2004, starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth.
- Watch Lars von Trier’s [Dogville](#), 2003, starring Nicole Kidman, who plays a fugitive in Colorado during the Great Depression. This film offers an unusual but extremely focused insight into the human condition.

Genre: landscape

Landscape is a broad term, especially in the hands of artists, and its low ranking in the hierarchy of genres established in the seventeenth century, bears little or no relevance today. Traditionally, it relates to our natural, rather than man-made environment, although these categories are not always easily distinguished.

Landscape can also include scenes of human activity. Landscapes are not always faithful representations. Depending on the period of their creation, landscapes can represent an idealised ‘myth’ of the land, or an expression of national pride, or perhaps subjective emotional and even **abstracted** representations.

The landscape in Western art seems to have fallen in and out of favour over the centuries. It emerged during the Renaissance as a convincing backdrop to scenes enacted from the Bible or from mythology, and continued to grow in stature during the sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century, landscape was recognised as being a valuable genre in its own right.

Exploring the genre of landscape further



- Visit the [Mauritshuis website](#) for a critical approach to the accuracy of Vermeer’s depiction of *View of Delft*.



- Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, 2006, contains information on Vincent van Gogh. Also available as a hardback book (Bodley Head, 2009).

Genre: still life

Still life, devoid of human figures and more demonstrative of artistic skill than imagination and intellect, was considered relatively unimportant in the hierarchy of genres. Still life commonly refers to paintings depicting a selection of everyday objects such as fruit, flowers, utensils and collectors' items, which may have been painted both for the intrinsic value of their form and in order to infuse the objects with symbolism (often religious). Still life paintings were traditionally small in scale, in accordance with their status and likelihood of hanging in a private dwelling.

Seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch painting, such as [*An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*](#), c.1640, by Harmen Steenwyck (1612–1656), excelled in this genre. Objects were carefully chosen for the senses they evoked. Delicate materials such as the paper and the shell were common, not least for their reference to the fragility of human life. The skull acts as the ultimate reminder of mortality also known as **memento mori**. Thus, this painting is essentially a religious work in the guise of a still life. **Vanitas** are examples of still life with religious overtones, and often are concerned to point the viewer towards an awareness of his or her own mortality.

Subjects

Subjects as a category may seem slightly confusing in its relation to genre, since genres consist of subjects, but there are so many varied subjects that they reach far beyond the confines of the hierarchy of genres. Perhaps the easiest way to settle their distinction is to view the genre as describing what a painting *is* (its category) and the subject as what it is about, or what it depicts.

Subjects: religious

In this context, religious subjects are drawn from the Western world where Christianity was historically the dominant religion. Images are commonly drawn from Christian stories in the New Testament, such as the Crucifixion and Entombment of Jesus, together with other narrative scenes from His life; however, not all biblical works are based on narrative. Images of the Virgin Mary tended to be most widely depicted in the art of Catholic countries such as Italy. Christian images are almost as old as Christianity itself and it was not until the Italian Renaissance in the early fifteenth century that secular subjects became more commonplace. In modern times, religious art has tended to be less motivated by devotion than by aesthetics. As mentioned previously, stories and figures from the Bible can be included under the 'history' genre; however, they can also be treated as a subject in terms of having religious subject matter.

Exploring religious subjects further



- Religious Subjects: watch a [video clip](#) of Norman St John Stevas interviewing Elisabeth Frink about her body of work and her artistic influences.
- Watch [Sister Wendy Beckett in conversation with Journalist Bill Moyers](#) about the religiosity and controversy surrounding Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*.
- Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, 2006, contains information on Caravaggio. Also available as a hardback book (Bodley Head, 2009).

Subjects: the nude

The nude has become one of art history's most enduring subjects and is rich terrain for exploring themes of gender and racial **stereotypes**, as well as culturally specific ideals of beauty. While the female nude has been invested with iconic status and has become synonymous with gallery visits and perhaps even art history itself, the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome had an unparalleled aesthetic appreciation for the beauty, musculature and strength of the naked male form, and heroes, athletes and gods were commonly depicted unclothed.

Exploring the nude further



Watch the film [Moulin Rouge](#), directed by Baz Luhrmann and starring Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor. The film's opening sequence uses a montage editing technique which is reminiscent of the transient side of modern life championed by Baudelaire and the Impressionists. It is an enjoyable way to immerse yourself in the seedier side of Parisian nightlife and recreation. There is also something of Manet's [Olympia](#) in Nicole Kidman's character, Satine.

Subjects: motherhood

The subject of motherhood is long-standing in the history of art, and images of maternity have featured across cultures and centuries. In the Western tradition, the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, has often been viewed as symbolic of a mother's love, endurance and sacrifice.

Exploring motherhood further



- To hear Barbara Hepworth discuss the influence of the Cornish landscape on her work, visit 'Barbara Hepworth: The Landscape of Cornwall Transposed in Sculpture' on the [BBC website](#).

Subjects: war – heroisation and protest

War is also a long-standing subject in art. War may be depicted from the perspective of a pacifist like Picasso in his iconic anti-war manifesto, *Guernica*, or commissioned to accurately and meticulously depict military personnel and events. Some subjects may stand

alone while others may also be found in the hierarchy of genres discussed at the start of this chapter

Exploring war further



- Simon Schama, *The Power of Art*, 2006, contains information on Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793. Also available as a hardback book (Bodley Head, 2009). See also a discussion of the painting on the [Khan Academy website](#).
- *The Private Life of a Masterpiece: The Complete Series 1–5*, 2007, is based on Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, 1814. See also a discussion of the painting on the [Khan Academy website](#).



- Examine Emily Prince's multi-media installation *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But Not Including the Wounded, nor the Iraqis, nor the Afghans)*, 2004. Consider how artists across the ages and across cultures visit and revisit the subject of war. Prince converts dehumanising statistics, over 5,000 of them, into identifiable people, and the poignancy of her work is heightened by the fact that the installation will remain unfinished until the war is over. Visit [Emily Prince's website](#) and the [Saatchi Gallery website](#) for further details about this work.



Practice tasks, based on this article.

- 1 Compare and contrast two paintings and/or sculptures of the same genre that clearly demonstrate different representations of the subject. You may use examples by the same or different artists.
- 2 Describe and comment on two sculptural representations of either the nude or clothed figure. Each of your examples should be by a different artist.
- 3 Analyse two paintings, each by a different artist, showing how the story or sequence of events is conveyed.
- 4 Describe and discuss the difference and similarities between either two landscape paintings or two portrait paintings.

Further Reading

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