



The Superpower of Looking Kit:

Your essential guide for unlocking the power of images



About this resource

This kit is a central resource for The Superpower of Looking – a programme which seeks to transform the visual literacy skills of children, taking the world of art and images as its starting point. It has been designed to help everyone understand the key elements of works of art. Head to The Superpower of Looking homepage to explore the full suite of resources which support delivery of the Art and Design curriculum.

www.artuk.org/learn/the-superpower-of-looking

The kit focuses on composition, space, colour, line, light, scale, materials and techniques, and figures.

A Q&A methodology underpins The Superpower of Looking programme to train an acute ability to observe artworks and images. Suggested questions and subject-specific terminology have been provided for each element. These can be used to investigate and analyse paintings.



Composition

Composition refers to the shapes within the picture and the arrangement of the picture.

- Is the painting upright (**portrait**) or horizontal (**landscape**)?

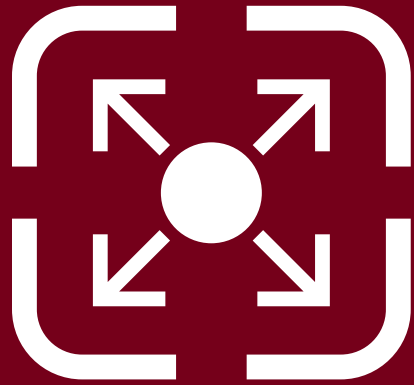
Portrait

Landscape

Tip

Try squinting, it really helps! Are we made to focus on anything in particular?

- How has the artist chosen to fill the space (picture plane)?
- Where are our eyes led first? Are we made to focus on anything in particular? Has the artist 'zoomed in' on anything? Why?
- Can you see any shapes in the picture, e.g. squares, circles, triangles, rectangles? Are any of these shapes used more than once? When the same shapes are used repeatedly, it can create harmony like notes in a chord in music.
- Is the painting **symmetrical** or **asymmetrical**? If it is not symmetrical, is it balanced?
- Are there any **framing devices**? Artists may position elements in a composition to frame them, e.g. a tree on the left-hand side and a hill on the right may frame figures in the middle to create balance and/or focus in the composition.
- Has the subject matter been **cropped** or edited? What does this tell us about what the artist finds important?



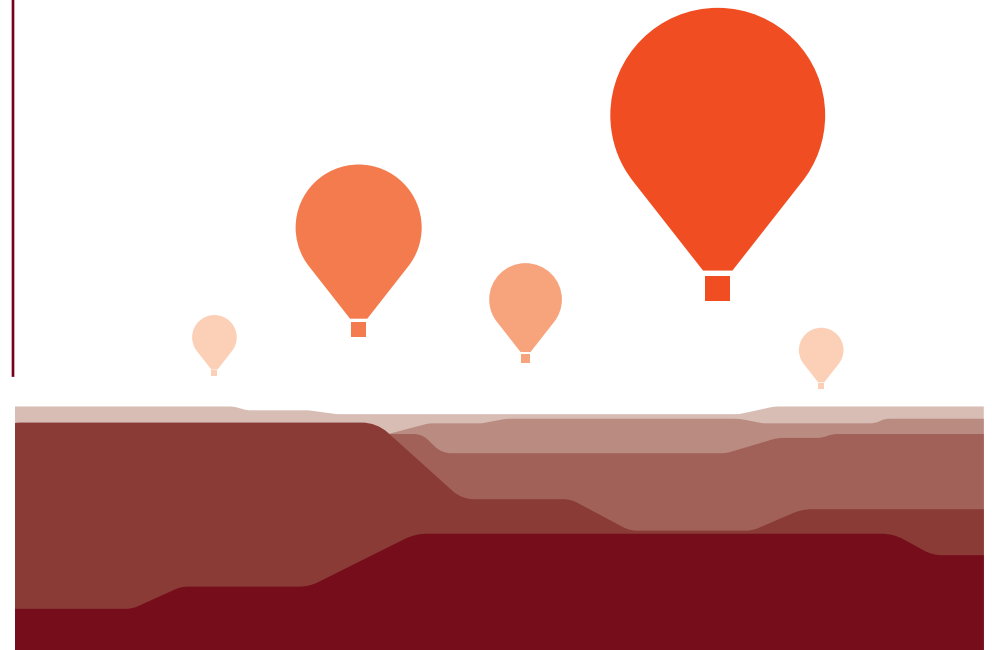
Space

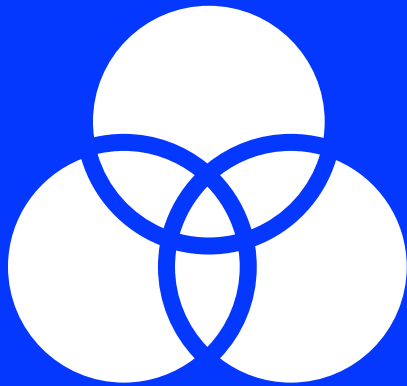
Space refers to a sense of three-dimensions or depth. It may also refer to a sense of physical space such as a void around objects or figures in a composition.

- Has the artist created a believable space? Do we feel that we could enter the space and walk deeper into the painting? If not, why not?
- Do the objects/figures become smaller in size as they get further from us?
- Is there an obvious arrangement of space: a **foreground, middle-ground** and **background**?
- Has the artist used **line**? Line can be used to create a sense of space and depth, e.g. drawing additional lines on a 2D square shape turns it into a 3D cube.
- Has the artist used colour to help create a sense of distance (**atmospheric perspective**), e.g. the colour becomes paler as it gets further away?
- Has the artist used **modelling** to create **3D**, solid-looking objects, e.g. shading on a face?
- Are there any shadows thrown by figures or objects to imply 3D space?
- Are we made to look up or down (we call this a high or low **viewpoint**) or are our eyes meeting an object at the same level? What effect does this have on our **interpretation**?

- Has the artist used **layering** and/or overlapping of objects or figures to create a sense of space?
- Is anything shown at a dramatic angle that makes the object look realistic either as it recedes or advances towards us (**foreshortening**)? e.g. if the flat palm of a figure's hand faced the viewer straight on it would appear more 2D than if they pointed directly at us, suggesting depth (3D).

Using colour to create a sense of distance





Colour

Colour has a function in images beyond its appearance, e.g. a colour may appear as red, but red may have expressive, cultural, social, historical and political meaning in a given context. Colour also intersects with other elements, e.g. space (see atmospheric perspective).

- What is the colour palette (the range of colours used)?
- Has the artist used **primary colours** (red, blue, yellow)? These colours are bright and pure so what effect do they have? Has the artist used **secondary colours** (orange, green, purple)? Perhaps the artist has used very little or no colour (black/white/grey – **monochromatic**).
- Has the artist used **warm colours** (red, orange, yellow) or **cool colours** (blue, green, turquoise), or both? How do they affect the feel of the painting?
- Has the artist used **complementary colours**? (These are colours which sit opposite each other on the colour wheel such as red/green, yellow/purple, orange/blue.) These combinations allow both colours to 'pop'. Where has the artist chosen to use colour in this way?



Colour Wheel



Primary Colours



Secondary Colours



Complementary Colours

- Has the artist used **saturated colour** (bright and vivid) or is the colour pale and washed-out?
- Has the artist used colour descriptively, as we see it in the real world or expressively, expressing emotion or creating mood?
- Has colour been used to model (shade) elements in the painting to create a realistic, 3D effect or has colour been used in blocks, to create a flat, 2D effect?
- Has colour been used symbolically? e.g. darker colours signifying low **mood** or drama and red signifying passion, war or love depending on the context.
- Have similar colours been dotted around to create a sense of unity in the composition? Or, have clashing colours been used to create **disharmony**?
- Colour can also be used compositionally, to help organise the picture and direct your eye, e.g. red advances (stands out), blue recedes (stands back). Black and white are striking opposites and so their exaggerated use can be visually powerful.

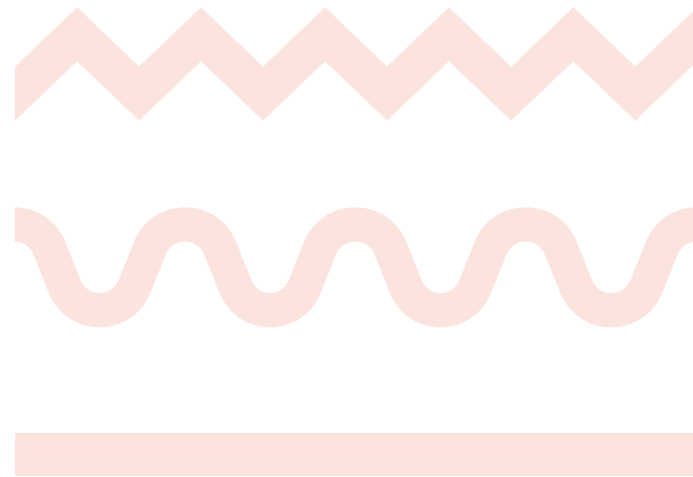


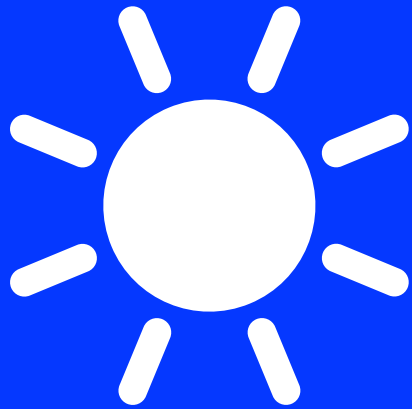


Line

Line can be used to make things look realistic in a space (line can be used to create a sense of space and depth, e.g. drawing additional lines on a 2D square shape turns it into a 3D cube). Line can also be used expressively to create a feeling or a mood.

- Do we notice outlines in the painting or are the lines invisible as they are in real life, e.g. at the corners of our mouths?
- If line is present, is it thick (prominent) or thin? What effect does this have?
- Does the line appear angular/harsh or rounded and fluid? What effect does this have?
- Does the artist use line (perhaps distinctive brushwork) to create patterns, movement or texture?
- Is the object/subject contained by line, e.g. a human form appearing realistically contained by its outer skin (as in real life), or broken up by it, e.g. a body's outline fragmented for expressive effect?
- Are there repeating lines, e.g. horizontals, verticals or diagonals? What effect do these have?
- Does line create a sense of movement?

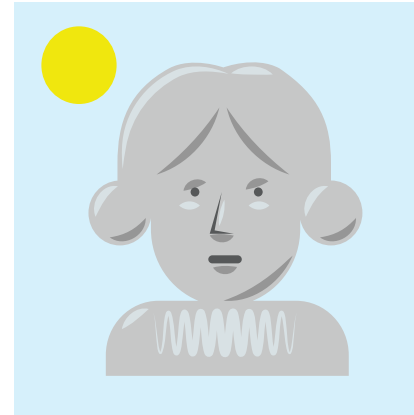




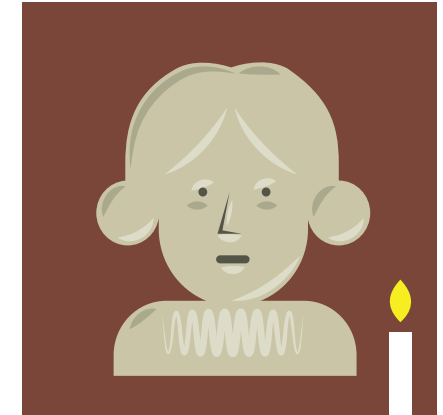
Light

Light may refer to the visible illumination of something in a painting to catch our eye, the physical illusion of a light source (e.g. the sun), or light appearing in relation to shade when modelling an object or figure. Its use may affect our interpretation of the mood (atmosphere) in a painting.

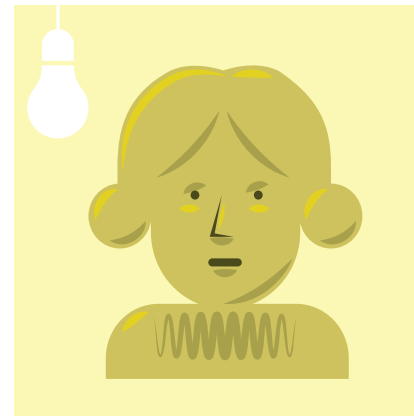
- Can you see a **light source** or light sources in the work? Is it man-made, or natural?
- Does the light source create **mood**? e.g. moonlight can create a frightening atmosphere and sunlight creates a happy one?
- Does the light look **realistic**? e.g. are there shadows?
- What different textures does the light in the artwork help you notice? e.g. hard objects, soft fabrics, flesh or furniture.
- Has the artist used light to draw attention to certain things? Has the artist used shadow to draw our attention to certain things? Light and shade can be used to direct our eye and focus our attention.
- Does light change as we go from the foreground to the distance? How does this help create a feeling of space and atmosphere?
- Light and shadow can be used to create a sense of volume - a 3D quality. When there is strong tonal contrast, it's called **chiaroscuro**, a technique often used to create mood, e.g. drama, tension or secrecy.
- Does the light suggest a time of day? Is this important to the story that the picture tells?



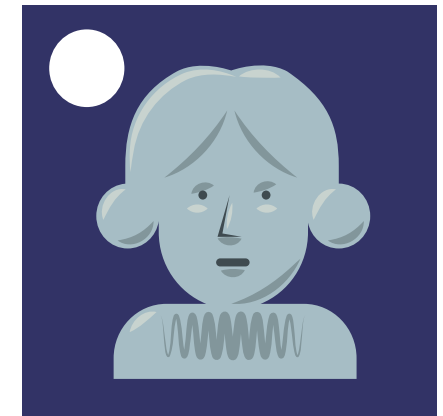
Natural daylight



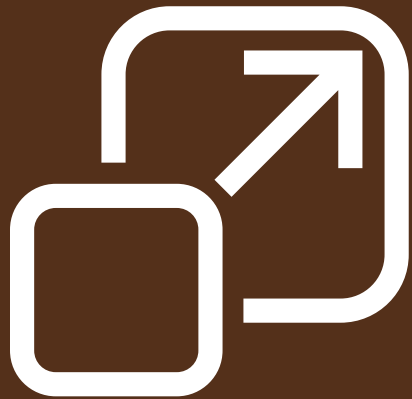
Candle/lamplight



Electric/artificial light



Natural moonlight



Scale

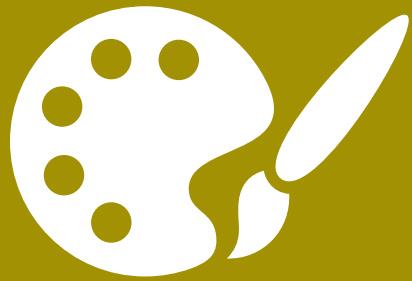
Scale may refer to the physical size of the actual painting, or the scale of figures, objects or their surroundings within the painting.

- Are some elements in the artwork larger to imply importance or does their scale relative to one another imply meaning? Size and scale can relate to meaning and status.
- Is the painting's overall size large or small?
- Where do you think a painting might have hung on account of its scale, e.g. in a grand palace or a private room?



Tip

The dimensions of works are provided in the context box in each lesson resource. Use rulers or metre sticks to measure out the size of an artwork in class, on the floor or on a whiteboard.



Materials & techniques

- An artist's choice of material (medium) such as paint may be applied using a technique to disguise their brushwork and so create the illusion of reality, or to draw our attention to the paint-loaded nature of the brushwork first and foremost. These choices depend on what the artist wants to achieve.

- What type of material (medium) has the artist used, e.g. oil paint, acrylic paint, etc?

- What are the characteristics of the medium? For example:

Oil: this medium dries slowly and can be blended to create the illusion of reality (a 3D world). Brush marks in oil paint can either be hidden (disguised) or applied boldly and thickly (impasto) to create more texture and a sense that the paint has only just been applied (immediacy).

Acrylic: this medium dries more quickly than oil and so shading (modelling) is more difficult to achieve. This makes an acrylic painting look flatter (2D, perhaps graphic) in comparison to one painted in oil. The flat blocks of colour characteristic of acrylic create a more modern feel.

- What effect does the choice of medium have on the appearance of the work?

Tip

The medium of each artwork is provided in the context box in each lesson resource.





Figures

Look carefully at the figures to determine who the characters are and the narrative (story) of the scene. Consider expression, gesture, symbols and attributes.

Expression: happiness through a smile; sadness through the downward inclination of the corners of the lips, perhaps tears and a furrowed brow; surprise through raised eyebrows and mouth ajar; anger through flared nostrils and perhaps even exposed teeth; disgust through a wrinkled nose and bulging cheeks, etc.

- How would you describe the expression of each figure? What might this tell us about them?
- If the artwork features multiple figures, do the figures have different expressions and do these help to tell a story?

Gesture: the action, form and pose of a figure such as the way we can communicate using our bodies, e.g. through our hands or another body part. Some gestures can be emphatic such as punching the air, splaying fingers or pointing a finger at someone. Other gestures, such as standing strong with both feet grounded, may convey confidence in a figure.

- Does the figure's pose and/or gesture show us what they are thinking or feeling?
- Does the figure's pose and/or gesture direct our gaze anywhere? (This element overlaps with composition because a figure's gaze and gesture may direct our eyes to look elsewhere in the painting's composition). Does gesture create movement or a sense of direction on the canvas?



Symbols and attributes: symbols offer a second and deeper meaning, and in art can be found in many forms including clothing, jewellery, animals, plants, etc. For instance, a rose can be a symbol of love. An attribute is usually an object which often has symbolic meaning, e.g. crowns symbolise royalty.

- What are the figures wearing? Is this symbolic in any way? e.g. fine jewellery and fabrics to indicate wealth and status.
- Are they in possession of any objects? What does this tell us about them? e.g. a map may indicate a person is well travelled, or scissors and a tape measure may indicate a person's creativity.
- Look at each figure included in the artwork. Compare any differences in how their clothing and possessions are presented.



Graphic adapted from
Elizabeth I (1533-1603) (the 'Armada Portrait')



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