

Life observed

Painting, from the Latin *depingere*, is the creation of a pattern of forms on a two-dimensional surface by means of colour and line.

Subjects

When you look at a painting, you immediately understand what it is about. It can depict a rural scene with trees and a cloudy sky (**landscape**), a rough sea with sails and rocks (**seascape**) or a busy street (**cityscape**).

It can portray famous people like members of the royal family, noblemen, statesmen, actors and artists, great ladies or mid-low class workers: a goldsmith, a merchant, a young servant, etc. (**portrait**). Sometimes also other members of the family (wife, children, parents) are portrayed with the protagonist. Portraits are mostly named after the sitter, for example *Henry VIII*, *Master Hare*, *Colonel Guy Johnson*, *Madame Moitessier*, *La famille Belleli*, *Self-portrait in Smoking*, etc. People can also be caught when doing routine activities like eating boiled potatoes in a dark room, playing cards in a pub or cricket in the open. In all these cases the subjects are **human figures**.

Religious paintings can show, for example, the birth of the goddess Venus, the fight between the gods and the Giants, the visions of a saint or the death of a martyr. When **animals** are the subject they can be wild horses running in a plain, farm animals in a courtyard, cows grazing, etc.

By the end of the 18th century scenes of everyday life with an anecdotic¹ character or meant to point to a moral, were called **genre paintings**. The same label² is applied to scenes representing historical events like famous battles, memorable political resolutions and to secularized³ religious paintings.

Sometimes paintings represent ideas as allegorical figures like *Good and Bad Government* by A. Lorenzetti, *Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli, *Allegory on the Blessing of Peace* by Pieter Paul Rubens or *Work* by Ford Madox Brown (**allegory**).

Also inanimate objects can draw the attention of the artist, for example, a vase of sunflowers or a collection of small objects – jugs, glasses, fruit, vegetables, dead game,⁴ etc. – arranged on a table (**still life**).

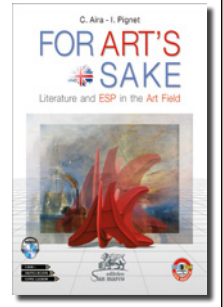
When no recognizable scenes or objects are represented, but the appeal of the painting depends on the expressive properties of colours and shapes, we call it **abstract art**.

These categories are not fixed in time. More subdivisions are possible and some of them can overlap, like religious painting and allegory, or portraits and the human figure.

The artist's intentions and the hidden meaning of the painting can be understood only by studying it closely and learning its genesis.⁵

GLOSSARY

- 1 relating to a minor narrative event
- 2 definition
- 3 including people (or styles, subjects, etc.) who do not belong to the church
- 4 wild animals, birds and fish
- 5 origin



ACTIVITIES



Reading comprehension

1 Look at the paintings in these pages and match each of them with its subject, choosing among the following suggestions. There are more words than necessary.

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------|----------------------|-------|
| 1 Cityscape | ..... | 5 Landscape | ..... |
| 2 Seascape | ..... | 6 Human figure | ..... |
| 3 Portrait | ..... | 7 Religious painting | ..... |
| 4 Still life | ..... | 8 Animal | ..... |

2 Look at the paintings again and match each of them with its title and author.

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1 The Card Players by Paul Cezanne | ..... |
| 2 Still Life with Checked Tablecloth by Juan Gris | ..... |
| 3 Young Mother Sewing by Mary Cassatt | ..... |
| 4 The Calm Sea by Gustave Courbet | ..... |
| 5 At the Waterfall by David Claypoole Johnston | ..... |
| 6 Venice from the Bacino di San Marco by Francesco Guardi | ..... |

Writing

3 Now answer the following questions.

- 1 Which of the paintings do you like best?
- 2 Can you explain why?
- 3 Which painting do you like least?
- 4 What makes you dislike it?
- 5 Which painting is more detailed?
- 6 Can you identify the objects in the still life?