
9 & 10 May 2025Learning Curve Lecture Series: Emotions in 17th Century Art

Horror

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Introduction

How does art communicate emotion? Even if the artist creates a painting hoping for a particular emotional reaction from the viewer, that response cannot be assured. Unlike texts, the visual medium depends on a reciprocal understanding or recognition of body language and expression. As Jennifer Montagu noted, 'Art is a medium of communication and there would be little purpose in providing the most meticulously accurate image of an expressive figure, if its expression could not be recognised by the beholder'. Artists have to translate emotion into expression, which in turn must communicate the desired emotion to the viewer, who will then react to the painting in a highly subjective way. This is a notoriously uncertain process and anything but predictable, depending not only on the skill of the artist, but also on what the beholder brings to this encounter. In the first part of this session we will talk about feelings in front of paintings and why the expression of emotion becomes so important to artists in the seventeenth century.

Lecture summary: Horror

In the second session this week I want to explore the fascination for paintings of horror and pain in seventeenth century Europe in the light of much recent scholarship which has confirmed the active agency that paintings played in people's lives. If images were not simply possessions, but had the potential to model behaviour, to protect, as well as to heal and to harm, how do we explain the popularity of images of repulsive or terrible subjects? Horror pictures are particularly interesting in that they push the boundaries of decorum, of what should be depicted, what can be depicted and what could be tolerated by an audience. In doing so they not only threatened existing normative emotional regimes but helped re-shape them. This week we will examine the possible viewing conditions and context for Rubens's paintings of the Medusa. What was the appeal of commissioning a painting of the severed head of Medusa surrounded by writhing snakes that looked real? How did such paintings affect the lives of those who owned them, or indeed looked at them? What were they for?

Slide list

1. August Friedrich Schenck, *Anguish*, c. 1878, oil on canvas, 151 x 251.2 cm, National Gallery, Melbourne.
2. Thomas Kennington, *Homeless*, 1890, oil on canvas, Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo.
3. Anon., *Icon of the Virgin Mary*, Santa Maria in Aracoeli, Rome.
4. Rogier Van der Weyden, *Deposition*, c. 1435, oil on oak panel, 220 x 262 cm,
5. René Descartes, Frontispiece of his treatise, *Passions of the Soul*, Paris, 1649
6. Charles Le Brun, Frontispiece of his *Conference sur l'Expression generale et particuliere des passions*, Amsterdam, 1713
7. Charles Le Brun, Frontispiece of his English Edition, *Expressions of the Passions of the Soul*, London, c. 1760.
8. Annibale Carracci and/or Ludovico Carracci, *Four studies of heads drawn over a copy of Saint John the Evangelist*, c. 1585, 27.6 x 20.6 cm, black chalk, black and red chalk on paper, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

9. Annibale Carracci, *Drawing of a Youth*, black pencil, with whitening, on brown paper, 33 x 21.1 cm, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, Windsor.
10. Annibale Carracci, *Drawing of a Youth*, red chalk, 26.4 x 22.5 cm, mid 1580s, Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection.
11. Anon., damaged relief, Utrecht Cathedral, damaged in the iconoclasm of 1566.
12. Peter Paul Rubens, *Entombment*, oil on canvas, 1612, Getty Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
13. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St Teresa*, c. 1647-52, marble, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.
14. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Head of St. Teresa of Avila*, c. 1647-52, Terracotta, Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia, Rome.
15. Orazio Gentileschi, *Ecstasy of St Francis*, 1600-1601, oil on canvas, 165.1 x 116.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
16. Gregorio Fernández, *Christ*, polychrome sculpture, 1627, National Museum of Sculpture Valladolid, Spain.
17. Map of Low Countries in the seventeenth-century.
18. Emanuel de Witte, 1653, *Courtyard of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange*, 49 x 47.5cm, Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.
19. Frans Franken (II), *The Interior of a Picture Gallery with Connoisseur Admiring Paintings*, oil on panel, 71 x 104 cm, Private Collection.
20. Salomon de Bray, *Book and Picture Shop*, c. 1669, ink and watercolour, 7.6 x 7.6 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
21. Frans Hals, *Young Man and Woman at an inn*, 1623, oil on canvas, 105.4 x 79.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
22. Adriaen Brouwer, *Youth making a face*, c. 1632-1635, oil on panel, 13.7 x 10.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
23. Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654, oil on panel, 33.5 x 22.8 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague
24. Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter scene with skaters*, c. 1608, oil on panel, 77.3 x 131.9 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
25. Pieter Claesz, *Still life vanitas painting with sculpture of the Spinario*, 1628, oil on panel, 70.5 x 80.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
26. Jacques de Gheyn II, *Vanitas*, 1603, oil on wood, 82.6 x 54 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
27. Salvator Rosa, *Witches at their incantations*, c. 1646, oil on canvas, 72 x 132 cm, National Gallery, London.
28. Adam Elsheimer, *The Stoning of St. Stephen* (detail), 1604, oil on silvered copper, 34.7 x 28.6 cm, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland.
29. Gerrit van Honthorst, *St Sebastian*, c. 1623, oil on canvas, 101 x 117 cm, National Gallery, London.
30. Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, fresco m 13,7 x 12 m, 1536-41, Sistine chapel, Vatican City.
31. Jusepe di Ribera, *Prometheus*, oil on canvas, 193.5 x 155.5 cm, 1630-31. Location unknown.
32. Richard Haydock, Title page of his translation of Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo's. *Trattato dell'arte de la pittura*, 1584. This English translation was published in 1598.
33. Salvator Rosa, c. 1646-48, *Prometheus Bound*, oil on canvas, 224 x 179 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.
34. Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *Prometheus Bound*, 2.44 x 2.1 m, 1611, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
35. Frans Snyders, *Eagle with wings extended*, pen and brown ink and brown wash on paper, 28 x 20.2 cm, 1612, British Museum, London.

36. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Punishment of Tityus*, drawing, black chalk, charcoal on verso, 19 x 33 cm, Royal Collection, Windsor.
37. Jacob Jordaens, *Prometheus Bound*, c. 1640, oil on canvas, 245 x 178 cm, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.
38. Guido Reni, *Massacre of the Innocents*, oil on canvas, 268 x 170 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.
39. Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *Head of Medusa*, c. 1617-18, oil on canvas, 68.5 x 118 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
40. Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *Head of Medusa*, c. 1617-18, oil on panel, 60.6 x 112 cm, Moravian Gallery, Brno.
41. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 1598-99, oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
42. Jacopo Ligozzi, *Libyan vipers*, watercolour, Uffizi, Florence.
43. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Boy bitten by a Lizard*, c. 1595-1600, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London
44. Charles Le Brun, *Terror*, engraving.

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