

An interactive writing workshop

Overview:

Paintings can say so many different things to us – rarely do we agree on what is taking place or the meaning of a painting, least of all the artists intentions or a commissioner’s requirements. This is where writers and poets can enjoy a freedom and produce a narrative that may or may not be directly related to the subject matter of the painting.

During this interactive workshop, Ian showed some paintings that stirred creativity and inspired some writing – writing that could be used as the starting point for longer pieces.

1. **ICEBREAKER**

Prompt #1 “Within the painting”

Ian showed *The Hay Wain* by John Constable (1821) and asked the group to write a story, play, paragraph (or two), or a poem. The object of the exercise was not to describe the painting, but to develop a narrative based on impact of the painting on our senses.

(Writing Duration: 10 mins)

What do you imagine is happening within the painting?

- Characters?
- Setting?
- What is happening?

Prompt #2 “Feeling and Emotion”

The second painting shown was *The Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife* (also known as *The Arnolfini Marriage*) (1434) by Jan Van Eyck.

(Writing Duration: 10 mins)

Key questions:

- Impact on us as viewers?
- How is our interpretation and our senses deciphering a story, or narrative?

Ian invited the group members to share their initial writing.

2. **MAIN EXERCISE** “Imagine you are in the scene”

(Writing Duration: 30 mins)

Ian showed two further paintings and invited the group to choose one of the paintings to write a story, play or poem.

The Portrait of Primrose Ward (c.1954) by John Williams

Chip Shop (2006) by Angela Wakefield

Key questions for writers:

- Place yourself at the scene?
- Characters? (Are you one of the characters or the storyteller or both?)
- Setting?
- What is happening?
- What is important?
- Remember your five senses!

Ian invited group members to share their writing.

HANDOUTS (below):

- 16-point guide to looking at an artwork
- Art and its Histories – guides to the four paintings shown during the workshop

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN VIEWING AN ARTWORK

What is the title? (Does this provide any clues as to subject matter?)

Who is the artist? (Is there a signature or attribution?)

What is the Genre? (History painting, Portraiture, Landscape, Still life, Genre?)

What is the medium? (Painting, Sculpture, Print, Digital media, etc?)

When was it painted? (Can the artwork be attributed to a specific style or period?)

What are the materials used? (Paint, canvas, wood, stone, etc?)

How have the materials been used? (Have these been used delicately; or in a bold, brash manner? Is there evidence of more than one material being used? How has the material(s) been applied?)

What is the subject matter? (Does this support the picture's impact; or affect the way you see the picture?)

How is the composition arranged? (Are there dominant lines of organisation?)

Space? (Where are you in relation to the picture?)

Is there form? (Is there depth and volume? Three-dimensional feeling? Is it realistic or abstract?)

Setting? (Are you seeing the artwork as it was intended by the artist / display?)

Tone? (What does the part of light and shade play in the artwork?) (Chiaroscuro = the treatment of light and shade in drawings and paintings by an artist)

Colour? (Is the colour part of the structure of an artwork and have a significant role; or is the colour just for effect and impact?)

Spiritual / Political / Cultural / Social relevance? (Is there a story behind, interwoven, or clearly apparent in the artwork; are there overtones and messages to decipher? Was there a specific use for the artwork – i.e., altarpiece, devotional image in a church or chapel or private devotional use? Portrait – is this an ancestor; well-known famous person or a person of rank or position?)

Backstory / Art History? (Do we know of or can find out regarding provenance? Can we establish authenticity? What do we know of the artist and has there been any artistic license or intention as part of the creative process?)

THE HAY WAIN

(Originally titled: *Noon*)

Painted: 1821.

Artist: John Constable (1776 – 1837)

Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 130.2 x 185.4cm

The National Gallery

WHAT GENRE AND STYLE IS THE PAINTING?

Painting category/Genre

Art / Style/Period

- Landscape

- British Romanticism

SIGNS OR SYMBOLS IN THE PAINTING THAT MAY PROVIDE CLUES AS TO MEANING OF THE PAINTING?

- Landscape: Composition is a real depiction of everyday country life
- The horse drawn wagon (The Hay Wain): symbol of cultural importance; a working scene heading off to the field at the bend of the River Stour. Men can be seen cutting the hay in the field.
- Dog: Symbol of fidelity in Renaissance paintings – in many respects, that connection of the dog watching over his master as his master controls the Hay Wain through the shallow but stoney bed of the river.
- Sky: Typical English summer day. (Noon – how do we know this? The light appears to come from almost overhead; plus, extracts from the artists letters and diaries suggest the title of the painting was originally *Noon*.)
- The Cottage – Willy Lot's cottage is also a working watermill. The artist's brother described the painting as seeing the watermill turn "...I see that it will go round"
- The artist's signature:

Signed and dated bottom right of centre.
John Constable pinx. London 1821.

HOW DO WE BELIEVE CONSTABLE EXECUTED THE PAINTING?

- Painted in the artist's studio during the winter of 1821/22 in London; taken from sketches made at the location the previous summer. Also, records show the artist was influenced by a sketch undertaken by his friend John Dunthorne entitled *The Harvest Wagon*. This gives rise to the change of title for the painting to *The Hay Wain*.

- The artist painted in a figure of another person close to the dog; but, later brushed this figure out.
- A separate horse and barrel appear to have been brushed out of the painting (left of centre by the bank, suggesting a much busier scene to the one the artist decided upon).
- The cottage shows an extension which suggests the artist worked from two separate preparatory sketches.
- The painting was part of a collection of Constable “six-footers” to be exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1822.

EXHIBITED AND FAVOUR?

- Royal Academy – 1822
- British Institution – 1823
- Paris Salon – 1824 (Awarded a gold medal by Charles X – this is now incorporated within the frame).

Although was not initially received favourably by the art community in Britain; the painting was voted in the 1990s as “Britain’s favourite painting.” A second poll by the BBC in 2005 placed Constable’s *The Hay Wain* in second place to *The Fighting Temeraire* by JMW Turner.

For Art Historians

The starting point of reference: *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable RA*, edited by C.R. Leslie. Published in 1843, with an expanded edition in 1845. Copies still available today.

THE PORTRAIT OF GIOVANNI ARNOLFINI AND HIS WIFE

(Also called *The Arnolfini Marriage Portrait*.)

Painted: c.1434.

Artist: Jan Van Eyck (active 1422 – died 1441)

Oil on oak panel

Dimensions: 82 x 60cm

The National Gallery

WHAT GENRE AND STYLE IS THE PAINTING?

Painting category/Genre

- Portraiture

Art / Style/Period

- Northern Renaissance

SIGNS OR SYMBOLS IN THE PAINTING THAT MAY PROVIDE CLUES AS TO MEANING OF THE PAINTING?

- Portrait: Composition suggests a married couple – hand in hand.

Is Arnolfini's raised right-hand gesture suggesting he is stating and accepting his marriage vows?

- Dog: symbol of fidelity – in this case of both persons portrayed as the dog is central between the couple
- Shoes: Sanctity in the bedchamber; however, one shoe on the carpet by the bed may suggest Arnolfini's wife died in childbirth. The other shoes in the foreground are thought to belong to Arnolfini and are placed on the hard wooden floor suggesting strength in mourning.
- Candle: Only one candle is lit (on the side of Arnolfini) suggesting that God is watching down on him suggesting him to be a widower. The unlit candles suggesting his wife has died.

Is this painting therefore a "memorial" portrait commissioned by Arnolfini at a time of grief?

NB: Ralph Mayer in his book *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* (1951) suggests this was a commission by Philip The Good – for his Court Painter, Jan Van Eyck, to paint a double portrait celebrating Arnolfini and confirming the King's patronage.

- The mirror – A convex silvered mirror - decorated with the scenes of the passion of Christ. In the mirror itself, a third person, possibly a priest, can be seen – therefore suggesting this to be a marriage portrait; plus, a witness thought to be the artist (it depicts a man wearing red – there are some parallels to a self-portrait of Jan van Eyck wearing a red headress.
- Rosary beads – symbolism of prayers to the Virgin Mary. Also could indicate the month in which Arnolfini's wife died – October – which is the month of the Rosary
- Peaches – by the window – attributed to "Truth" (Some historians believe these to be oranges which were expensive and only affordable to the wealthy).

- The artist's signature:

Johannes (Jan) van Eyck was here 1434.

This confirms the artist; but also suggests he may have been present at the marriage of Arnolfini to Jeanna Cenami.

- Symbols of Arnolfini's wealth:

Arnolfini's dress

Calm, natural pose. Favourable expression on the sitter's face (slightly upward cornering of her mouth) suggests she was relaxed for the artist. Her gaze is determined – eyes (blue green) are alert.

- Dress styling:

Appropriate, understated, 1950s, but beautifully marked by a posy of small roses.

- Flowers:

Symbol of Spring – an evanescence (vanishing/moving on – a portrait will capture the person in the moment but will not travel with the person through life and shall remain a statement of the time it was produced) of human life. As flowers bloom, so flowers die away. The flowers close to the mirror, seem to be hydrangeas?

- Mirror:

Reflection of light, but in this case a sombre setting purposely set up by the artist as opposed to implied terms of Renaissance or Impressionism for instance. Whilst there is no allegory in this portrait and the mirror is simply furnishing effects, we could deduce that the artist saw his own mindset reflected in the mirror – he was looking at a stunning young lady – perhaps his only beacon of light at that time?

- Chair: – A classical modelling of a throne. Guilt and worthy. The mirror is complimentary to the chair. The fact that the sitter is comfortable on the throne, suggests that the sitter may have held all the control.

- The artist's signature:

John Williams

Bottom right of centre.

HOW DO WE BELIEVE ANGELA EXECUTED THE PAINTING?

- Oil on hardboard. Painted in the artist's studio located at Herkomer's Studios.

It's likely the artist sketched out the composition on the hardboard with the sitter present – the sitting may have been two to three sessions. (Unconfirmed).

EXHIBITED AND FAVOUR?

- Commissioned piece. Removed from display for decades.
- Private Collection.
- Recently cleaned and restored.

References

Bushey Museum and Art Gallery have works by John Williams

CHIP SHOP

(Nuttall Street, Accrington, Lancs)

Painted: 2006.

Artist: Angela Wakefield (1978 – present)

Acrylic on canvas

Dimensions: 76 x 76cm

Private Collection (Originally exhibited at Ascot Studios, Ribchester, Lancs).

WHAT GENRE AND STYLE IS THE PAINTING?

Painting category/Genre

Art / Style/Period

- Landscape (Townscape)
- Contemporary British Urban Art

SIGNS OR SYMBOLS IN THE PAINTING THAT MAY PROVIDE CLUES AS TO MEANING OF THE PAINTING?

- Landscape: (Townscape) Composition is a real depiction of everyday urban life.
- Chip Shop: We've all been there. Cold, wet, Friday or maybe after watching our local football team midweek or on a winter's Saturday early evening. Pulling up in the car, the windscreen wipers have smeared the rainwater left and right. Visibility is still unclear and the street lights diffuse and dance with the urban house lights and shop front. Adjacent shops have closed up for the day.
- Realism: Urban terraced housing; parked cars; secondary shop fronts; orange/white sodium lighting – perhaps one streetlamp brighter than the other as they warm up to maximum lighting. The perspective levels of the buildings depict different periods of build. Dark roofs of slate tiles, dampened by the rain.
- Sky: Is dark and typically urban – no stars or moon can be seen due to cloud cover – even transparent skies would not reveal many stars due to the urban lighting pollution.
- Housing – Two up, two down. Rear passageways serving the entire row of houses. Outdoor toilets and outdoor coal cellars.

The interaction of light and shade and arrangement of colour, particularly in the reflective effects caused by the weather and townscape is important in understanding the narrative.

Angela said in the introduction of a book produced by Ascot Studios in 2007:

"I am inspired by the vast array of luminous man-made colours that transform our towns and cities from bleak and depressing spaces by day, to vibrant colourful fairgrounds by night."

- The artist's signature:

ASW.

HOW DO WE BELIEVE ANGELA EXECUTED THE PAINTING?

- Painted in the artist's studio located adjacent to Ascot Studios, Ribchester, Lancs.
- Acrylic is the artist's preferred medium – colours are thickly applied with brushes and pallet knife.

Angela sketched out her planned composition from photos. Accrington is her home-town and Nuttall Street is well known to her. This allowed a free-fluid approach to composition that yielded a great reward in the finished canvas.

Angela working in acrylic, worked fast to complete the composition. The painting was part of an impressive collection of canvases produced between 2002 – 2007. Whilst her style has changed and perhaps can be judged as “cleaner lines”, it was her original style of painting that caught the imagination. The original collection of canvases led onto further collections including impressive canvases of London and New York.

Angela's work has become highly collectible.

I considered *Chip Shop* as Angela's finest painting to date in 2007. Other impressive works at the time included: *Silhouette Street*; *CIS Solar Tower Manchester*; *Jazz Band*; and *Jam*.

EXHIBITED AND FAVOUR?

- Exhibited at Ascot Studios, Ribchester, Lancs, in 2007 as part of a series of townscapes depicting scenes in Accrington, Manchester, and areas in and around the Ribble Valley.
- Sold in 2008 to a private collector.

References

<https://www.angelawakefield.co.uk/>

Angela Wakefield – interview with the artist, *Art of England*, October 2007.

Angela Wakefield Revisited, *Art of England*, June 2010.

Angela Wakefield – The New York Series, *Art of England*, September 2011.