

# Vanity unfair: the real value of art history

*While some in the UK media take pleasure in taking cheap shots at art history, **Matthew Sanders**, director of the educational charity Magic Lantern, argues that this underestimates the enormous value the subject has in helping children express themselves and deepen their understanding across the curriculum*

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If you stepped into this painting, what would you hear?  
 What would you smell?  
 What might happen next?  
 What is happening outside the frame?  
 What did the artist leave out?  
 Why do you think they chose that colour?  
 Which part of the story would you have chosen to depict?

Children do not have the preconceptions or misconceptions about art that adults often have, but simply see it for the powerful, multi-faceted subject it is. They just get it. They do not find it a stretch to give voices to Lubaina Himid's protagonists in her striking painting *Between the Two my Heart is Balanced* and to connect it to discussions about immigration, race and gender. They relish coming up with imaginative poetic language to describe the abstract sun-drenched landscape of Frank Bowling's *Sacha Guyana Dreams* and how the artist gets their message across to the viewer. They love cowering at the thought of being deluged by Katsushika Hokusai's iconic *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and thinking about different ways to deal with fear. Anyone jaded by seeing copious tea

towel reproductions of John Constable's *The Hay Wain* will look at the painting with fresh eyes after hearing children's 'wows' and insightful storytelling when seeing it for the first time. They love to look, observe and put themselves in the picture. Many of us are used to whizzing past hundreds of images in art galleries without always stopping to take a deeper dive. Children, who are used to all manner of modern devices and moving images, are brilliant at taking a slow look at a still, silent painting.

In a recent virtual workshop I ran on Ancient Greece, a class of nine- and 10-year-olds were particularly taken with *Penelope Weeping over the Bow of Ulysses* by the eighteenth-century painter Angelica Kauffmann. They came up with a range of vocabulary to express her feelings such as 'depressed,' 'stressed,' 'sad' or 'regretful'. They imagined her thoughts: 'Is he lost?' 'Should I marry one of the suitors?' 'Has my love died?' They bent their bodies like Penelope's and tried to make the same expression as her. They had been learning about the supposed hero Ulysses, but now they were thinking about a sidelined character and how her husband's epic gallivanting had serious consequences for her. Exploring the painting helped the children understand the role of women in Ancient Greece, the choices artists make when deciding which stories to tell and the invaluable exercise of empathy.

The ability to analyse and decode images is a powerful skill that is at the heart of art history. In a world increasingly filled with social media and selfies, this ability has a new urgency. When children learn how to read a visual image, they can apply those skills to the wider world around them. Multiple possibilities can derive from exploring one work of art. *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein is a painting that never fails to mesmerise children. A discussion about composition and scale can segue into an exploration of mathematical concepts, geography, history or religion. Considering the men's poses, clothes and mysterious possessions broadens into reflections on identity and how we choose to present ourselves to the world.

Far from being the wishy-washy vanity subject loved by lazy tropes, art history has the extraordinary ability to help children express insights and deepen their understanding across the curriculum. If we want children to be inquisitive and independent thinkers, then art history can be a powerful tool in their armoury, helping them see the bigger picture long after an artwork fades from view. ■

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**Above** *Penelope Weeping over the Bow of Ulysses* by Angelica Kauffmann, 1778-1779 © Wolverhampton Art Gallery

**Below left** A year 3 session on Roman art and architecture at West Oxford Community

**Below right** Magic Lantern workshop in Albion Primary School, Rotherhithe





**Left** *Between the Two my Heart is Balanced* by Lubaina Himid, 1991 © Tate

**Above left** *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533 © The National Gallery

**Above right** *The Hay Wain* by John Constable, 1821 © The National Gallery

**When it comes to taking cheap shots at academic subjects, it is commonly accepted that art history is fair game:**

**Exhibit A: *Killing Eve*, Series 2, Episode 6**

Despite defying genres and overturning numerous TV tropes, *Killing Eve*'s writers resorted to old stereotypes about art history. In this scene, Eve asks her MI6 colleague Hugo to create a backstory for assassin Villanelle's alter ego, a 'waster' called Billie.

*Eve*: Give her a job. You know what? No, no job. A couple of vanity degrees. Something wishy-washy.

*Hugo*: Philosophy, history of art?

*Eve*: Great!



Ask a child what they think about art and they are likely to tell a very different story. When I have shown Bridget Riley's 1963 abstract painting *Fall* to adults, I have often been given short shrift; 'Anyone could have done that,' 'That's not art' or 'It's hurting my eyes.' When I recently showed it to a class of five- and six-year-olds as part of a workshop on patterns, the children's responses included 'It's a zebra close up,' 'It's hair,' 'It's curtains,' 'It's a waterfall,' 'It's a fingerprint.' They stood up straight, put their hands in the air and became the painting's wavy lines, their bodies moving faster the wavier they became, demonstrating the artwork's powerful energy. They got excited when I told them they could see the real thing free of charge in an art gallery. Children often tell me they have visited a gallery after a session on art history, eager to share their excitement of talking about paintings with their parents. There is a sense of ownership – they feel these are their paintings. They are particularly excited when they discover that paintings in public collections do indeed belong to all of us. Normalising and demystifying the subject at a young age helps build an enthusiasm that can endure into adulthood.

The pleasure that children of all ages and abilities get from interacting with art is valuable in itself, but there is so much more. Art history is not the same thing as art appreciation. It is not about giving value judgments about works of art but about asking big questions – why, how and for whom artworks are made. It is the study of human experience. It can be the spark that gets a child hooked on culture in general or any of the subjects that art can explore – history, geography, science, politics, RE, maths and beyond. It can engage the brain in critical thinking and problem solving, help children make connections with their prior learning and own experiences, pique their curiosity and teach them the skills to decode visual images.

In the last fifteen years I have run nearly 2,000 art history workshops in primary schools. The key to inspiring children's enthusiasm lies in how art is introduced. Simply presenting biographical facts about the standard canon of dead white male artists, or telling children what they are looking at, is not going to fire up their imagination. When children get the chance to become really immersed in the process of looking deeply, it is literally a different picture. If the questions are open-ended and designed to focus the children's observation and thinking, then their ideas come flowing:

## 'Children do not have the preconceptions or misconceptions about art that adults often have but simply see it for the powerful, multi-faceted subject it is'

**Exhibit B: *The Jonathan Ross Show*, 2 March 2013**

In an interview with Jonathan Ross, comedian Jack Whitehall explains why he began (but did not complete) an art history degree. The two men's sarcasm levels are par for the course in discussions about the subject.

*Ross*: What did you study at university?

*Whitehall*: History of art.

*Ross*: Wow, that's obviously come in very useful.

*Whitehall*: It's come in very useful.

*Ross*: How did you wind up doing history of art? Is that what you wanted your career to be?

*Whitehall*: No, it's what my father wanted my career to be – he wanted me to be an art historian.