VISUAL ANALYSIS OF **PAINTINGS**

1) Please **read this document carefully**, getting to grips with some of the vocabulary. Use a **highlighter** to highlight key words. If there is a term that you don't understand have a go at googling it. Don't worry if you can't find it, as we will go over this next term together.

2) Once you have done this, I'd like you to make a visit to your favourite gallery in London. Find a **portrait painting** (a painting of a person or people) that you like, and use the visual analysis check list above to write a description of this painting. It should be no longer than one page, typed, size 11 font. Please bring it to our first lesson next term. Please include a **colour image** of your chosen painting in addition, with **title, name of artist, and date.**

3) If you would like to start reading in preparation, you may like to buy/borrow E.H. Gombrich's *'Story of Art'* (published by Phaidon) as this will help you get to grips with chronology.

All the elements below are known as the **formal** qualities of painting. How each individual artist uses these elements makes up their **style (i.e. the distinctive characteristics of their work).** An artist's individual style will usually be linked to that of a **movement,** (or **school)**, and will share features with others artists in the geographical vicinity, or of the **period.** Undocumented works can often be **attributed** to artists on the basis of style.

Please note that this handout is only a guideline. It does not address issues of **subject matter**, **content**, or **interpretation**, i.e. **iconography**.

The following questions are designed to help you describe, analyse and examine the formal features of paintings for Unit 1. Such skills are central to Art History. Please note the specialised vocabulary and make sure that you learn it.

For your syllabus Formal Features include:
- **Composition**
- **Colour**
- **Pictorial Space**
- **(Materials, Techniques and Processes)**
- **Pattern/Ornament/Decoration**
- **Line/Shape**
- **Scale**
- **(Form)**

1.   **COMPOSITION** (from the Latin *compositio,*'placing together') considers the organisation, positioning, arrangement and relationship of features and elements in the work into a satisfying whole.(Diagrams can be very useful)

What is the dominant structure of the painting?
Is it formally arranged?
Is there a central axis, or central placement?
Is it symmetrical (on the vertical and/or horizontal)?
Or asymmetrical?

Is it balanced?
Is it rigidly geometrical according to certain conventions?
Does it use shapes or forms in a particular manner?
Does it use squares, rectangles or triangles/pyramids?
What effect does this have? Do they anchor the composition?

Does it use circles, or curves i.e. a curvilinear composition?
Does this create movement?

Or is it apparently unstructured?
Is it informally organised?

Where is the **focal point** (where are our eyes directed)?

Has the **Golden Section** been used?

Notice the format (portrait or landscape).
Is the image 'closed' (with elements confined within the frame)?
Or is it 'open' with elements appearing to continue beyond the frame?
Is there any **cropping** of the image?
Are some features/elements echoed?

How are the colours organised across the picture plane?
How is the light and shade organised?
How does perspective inter-act with the composition?
How is line used in relation to composition?

How does the composition link to the subject matter?
How does it help us to look at the most important part of the painting?
Is it harmonious, well-balanced, rigid, exciting, dramatic, decorative etc.?

2. <u>COLOUR</u>

What **hues** (colours based on wavelengths) are used?
Are the hues **saturated** (i.e. the most vivid form of the colour)?
Are the colours bright and intense (dimension from light to dark)?
Do the colours show **lustre** (i.e. brightness that exceeds surface colour, e.g. on silk, metal)
Are they **luminous** (brighter than surrounding visual field e.g. flame)?
Is there a wide range of colours?
What was the painter's **palette**?
Are **prismatic** colours (ref. Physics, or the colours of the rainbow: red, orange yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) on the colour wheel used?

Are there **primary colours** (red, blue, yellow from which all other colours can be derived)**?**
Or **secondary colours** (orange, green, violet which result from the mixing of two primaries)?
Or **tertiary colours** (from the mixing of two secondaries)?
Are **complementary colours**(opposite colours on the colour wheel that contrast and intensify each other)used?
Are **earth colours** (ochre, burnt umber, burnt siena etc)used?

Are the colours descriptive (i.e. where it is represented as it is seen)?
Is **local colour** (the 'natural' colours of objects)used?
Are the colours **warm** (red, orange, yellow)?
Or cool (green, blue, violet)?
Are **shades** (i.e. the colour + black)of one colour used?
Are **tints** (i.e. the colour + white) of colour used?
Are **tones** (i.e. the colour + grey, a variation in hue and lightness)used?

Are the colours weighty or light and weightless?
How does this affect the size of the objects (light objects look larger)?
Are the colours blended? Graded? Separated?

How important is colour in the painting?
Is it more important than line? Or does it simply fill in outline?
Does it create form?
What is its relation to light (e.g. Impressionists interest in colour as light meant they did not use black (lack of light)?

How is the colour used?
Is it used – expressively to create a feeling or sensation?
                          - to create a mood?
          - for **psychological** effects (e.g. blue for emotional coolness, rationality and sang-froid? Or 'the blues' for introspective melancholy?)?
          - **symbolically** (where colour can be used as an established convention, or part of a system conceived by an individual artist)? *(Until the C14th the four elements were represented by blue for air, black for earth, red for fire, and green for water. Blue was the colour of heaven. Then blue becomes associated with water, the opposite of red fire and hence the beginning of cool and warm colours.)*
                    _ **spiritually** (e.g. blue as transcendental yearning in Rothko, or Yves Klein)
          - for compositional unity?
          - as a means of suggesting volume and weight?
            - as a means of suggesting space? (cool colours recede, warm colours advance in space)
            - atmospherically?
          - for decorative purposes?
          - harmoniously? Discordantly?
How wide is the tonal scale?
Was **optical mixing** (see Neo-Impressionism)used?
Are there **colour patches** (see Cezanne)?
Is it a **monochrome** (variation of one single hue)?
Do the colours create a sense of calm, or drama and excitement?

3.   PICTORIAL SPACE (the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat picture plane/surface)

Is there a sense of depth in the painting? (i.e. an illusion of 'real' 3D space)?
Do the objects and figures appear to be located in **pictorial space**, or are they just piled on top of one another, or flat on the surface?
Does the illusion of space look realistic or unrealistic?
Can you see a clear foreground, middle-ground and background?

Is the 'focus' in the foreground, elsewhere or throughout?
If there is a sense of space how is it achieved:
- through colour (some recede, some come forward)?
- through colour relationships?
- through use of light and shade, tonal contrasts, tonal modelling and cast shadow?
- through layers of brushstrokes?
- through overlapping planes? (**picture plane** is the   -   surface of the painting)
- through a winding path that the eye follows?
-     through a series of steps etc.?
-     through changes in scale?
Do the figures/objects diminish in size to suggest space?
Does the compositional arrangement 'lead the viewer into' the picture?

Has a system of **perspective** been used?
What system of perspective has been used?
- **mathematical one-point perspective?** (where lines
    converge at one point on the horizon to give an
    illusion of space). Invented by Brunelleschi c.1417
    and first accurately used by Masaccio in The Trinity
    1426; written as a formula by Alberti in his book
    On Painting in 1435.
- **mathematical two-point perspective?**
- **linear perspective** (with diagonal lines reaching into
    picture space but not necessarily converging)?
- **atmospheric perspective** in which colours in a distant
    landscape fade?
- **aerial perspective** (officially invented by Leonardo)
    in which colours fade and forms dissolve with
    distance?

Can you work out the **vanishing point** by tracing the **orthogonals**? Is there more than one?
Does the **ground plane** tilt in a naturalistic manner?
Can you distinguish the artist's point of view?
Is the painting designed to be seen from one particular **viewpoint**? Is it high or low?
Is the viewpoint close to the image or far away?
Where is the spectator's eye-level (horizon line)?
Is there a narrow angle of view or a wide one?
Is the space connected to the spectator's space or separate from it? And how?
How do these points relate to the painting's original location?
What might a particular spatial construction convey?

Has perspective been applied to an individual figure/object rather than throughout (i.e.
foreshortening)?

4. USE OF LIGHT/TONE

Is the light **naturalistic**?
Does it come from a natural source (e.g the sun)?
Or an artificial source (e.g. an angel)?
Is the light source depicted in the painting?
Where is it? Is there more than one light source?

Are there any shadows cast? Are they naturalistic in direction?
Does the light heighten realism?
Is it used symbolically?
Is there any dramatic use of light and shade with strong
   contrasts to create form (i.e. **chiaroscuro**)?
What is highlighted and why?
Are the gradations from light to dark very subtle and
   without outline (i.e. **sfumato**, first used by
   Leonardo)?
Does the light model form?
Is there **tonal modelling**?
Does the light emphasise textures?
Is the effect three-dimensional or flat?
Is light and shade used as a means of creating pictorial space?
How are the colours connected with the distribution of
   light and shade?
Does light and shade modify the colour?
What colours are used to represent light and shade?
Are some colours deflected, absorbed, reflected?

Is reflected light depicted? And refracted light?
Does real light catch the surface? (i.e. heavy **impasto**)

Does light pick out the most important elements of the composition? (Symbolism, narrative etc.)
Does light make the details clearer?
Does light create a mood or atmosphere?

5. PATTERN/ORNAMENT/DECORATION

How important is pattern to the overall image?
Is the whole image organised for decorative purposes?
Or is decoration added to certain areas?
Is it crucial or secondary?
Is the pattern created with line or colour?
Does the pattern follow any recognised system?
Does it have a specific meaning?
Is pattern the dominant quality?
Does it link to other elements e.g. a perspective grid?
Is the pattern used to compose the image?
How detailed is the pattern?
Is it the result of materials or techniques?
Is it illusionistic or it is 3D?

6. LINE/SHAPE

Is the image constructed through line?
Do outlines dominate?
Do lines provide the edge to the forms?
What is the relationship between line and brushstrokes?
Is the line strong and continuous?

Is the line broken up?
Is it decorative?
What is the line's relationship with tone?
Is there a strong silhouette?
Describe the line - e.g. neurotic, flowing, sensuous etc.
Do the forms seem flat or three dimensional?
Is shape more important than space?
Are the shapes of the figures and objects naturalistic?
Or distorted? For expressive purposes? For pattern?
For emphasis?
Do the shapes overlap?
Are the shapes intended to form a pattern.

7. SCALE

Check the size (and location) of the actual painting.
On what scale is it when compared to the human form?
On what scale are the forms?
Monumental?
Life-size?
Miniature?
Is the scale of the figures within the image naturalistic?
Or is there a **hierarchy of scale** in which the most important figures are shown larger
regardless of where they are located in pictorial space?
Are certain objects larger to show their symbolic value?
How is the size and scale related to the meaning?

(8.   FORM/Figure (See Light/Tone, and Line/Shape)

Do the forms have solidity and mass?
Do they have a sense of volume?
Do they seem weighty?
Do they seem sculptural?
Is there **tonal modelling**?
Is consistent lighting used to model form?
Are the forms soft, hard, angular, curved etc.?
How are the forms depicted- through outline? Through
   mass? Through shading? Through colour?
Are the forms touching one another? Do they overlap?
Do they affect one another?
Are the forms distorted?
Are they depicted **naturalistically**
         realistically
         abstractly?
Is the artist more interested in form than **shape** or **pattern**?

Is the painting a tangible object in its own right?
Does it contain objects that have a tangible quality
  to them?

Does it suggest texture? (rough, smooth, soft, hard,
   transparent, opaque)

9.   INFLUENCES

Are there any distinct influences of other artists or movements or styles in any of these
stylistic features?
Please note that there is not need to mention specific style labels e.g. Cubism, Gothic
Revival in your Unit 1 answers.

Paper 1 (Visual Aanlysis): Sample Questions

The questions will always ask for:
- **A description/analysis of the formal features of the work, and/or the
  subject/theme (describe, analyse, identify, examine etc.)**
- **A discussion/interpretation of the work based on the description/analysis
  (discuss, interpret, explain, consider, account for, comment on, evaluate etc.)**

1)   Analyse the composition, colour and tonal effects of this painting **and** comment on
     how they have been used to represent the scene.

2)   Analyse the artist's use of colour **and** comment on its effectiveness.

3)   Describe the composition **and** use of colour in this painting, **and** comment on how
     each contributes to an interpretation of the subject matter.

4)   Analyse the ways space, depth and three-dimensionality have been created in this
     painting **and** evaluate their effectiveness.

5)   Identify the ways in which the artist has created space and depth and three
     dimensionality in this painting **and** discuss their effectiveness in representing the
     subject.

6)   Examine the use of line in relation to form and space **and** comment on how this has
     been used to represent the scene.

7)   Describe the figures in this painting. Discuss the significance of their setting.

8)   Analyse the use of light and tone in this painting. How has this affected the artist's
     interpretation of Nature?

Sample question:

(a)   Discuss the variety of ways light and shade has been used in two paintings of
         your choice.

Formal Features	Interpretation

Composition	
Colour	
Pictorial space	
Light/tone	
Materials/techniques	
Pattern/ornament/decoration	
Line/shape	
Scale	
(Form)	
Style?	

PORTRAITURE

A **portrait** is an image (painting, sculpture, print etc.) which aims to record and represent a **particular individual** (but not necessarily a person who is identifiable to us by name now). Images of the Virgin Mary, the God Apollo and so forth are NOT portraits. Portraits tell us about how different societies wanted to view themselves.

The term 'portrait' originates from the French "trait pour trait" (line for line) i.e. tracing or precisely copying. In English we use 'trait' as the way a line can convey character but also simply to describe someone's personality. A portrait is therefore an image that is the outward expression of a person at their most characteristic.

Western art has always been obsessed with the accurate reproduction of visual appearance (unlike the art of some other cultures). The portraits of the Ancient Romans were very significant. Pliny (first century AD) wrote an account of the art of his own day in his book Natural History in which he gave two versions of the origins of portraiture:

(1)   *"The question as to the origin of the art of painting is uncertain…but all agree that it began with tracing an outline round a man's shadow and consequently that pictures were originally done in this way."*

(2)   *"… modelling portraits from clay was first invented by Butades…owing to his daughter, who was in love with a young man; and she , when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief."*

Today the power of portraiture is believed to lie in the fact that it deals with individual people and records several appearances: their **external physical appearance**, and their **'inner self'**. In other words it shows a 'life-like' description and allows for emotional communication between the sitter and the spectator. We demand that a portrait is 'a good likeness' (i.e. the image we have already formed of the sitter), or that is offers us some heightened sense of humanity if the sitter is unknown to us, and about whom we have no expectations.

The Function of Portraits

1.   A good likeness
2.   A sense of individuality
3.   A sense of identity
4.   Information about the sitter

Portraits can be commissioned for two main reasons:

(a)   **Commemoration.** Vasari writing in the sixteenth century followed the tradition of Roman Portraiture and said:

> *"portraiture is the art which keeps images of man alive after their deaths."*

This can also be described as **retrospective.** Different aspects of the individual will be commemorated at different times and places e.g. power, status, authority, a family likeness etc. or the family's loss, and hence used as consolation.

(b)   **Propaganda.** In other words portraits can be used to promote individuals during their lives. This is particularly the case with rulers such as emperors, monarchs, princes, dukes and so forth. These are also known as **prospective**.

The artist (and also the historian) must consider the following issues:
(i)   The sitter's requirements.
(ii)   The artist's relation to the sitter.
(iii)   Function/purpose – (see above) whether it is **public** (kings, popes, etc.) or **private** (family, friend); to show wealth or status or family likeness etc.
(iv)   Format and size: - Single, double, diptych, group, pair, series, donor …
                                                - Head only, bust length, bust with hands, half-length,
                                                   three-quarter length, full length
                                                - Life-size, over life-size, small-scale?
(v)   Viewpoint – profile, full-face, three-quarter face?
(vi)   Pose
(vii)   Gesture
(viii) Expression
(ix)   Costume
(x)   Attributes
(xi)   Setting
(xii)   Medium and technique
(xiii) Overall effect

Some Types of Portrait

Commemorative:	of a marriage, victory, new position, new role, death etc.
Propaganda:	images of rulers at times of political crisis
Public:	official images of kings, queens, popes, doges, ambassadors, generals, admirals ….
Private:	family portraits for those one knows
Intimate:	images of friends, lovers, husbands, wives, children, showing genuine communication (often kept by the artist)…
Family:	emphasises lineage and inheritance, and legitimacy (often through likeness, or attributes)
Society:	usually idealises the sitter or emphasises their wealth, beauty, learning or achievements
Group:	shows membership of some association, or groups of people unified by common goals, and ideas.
Record:	an accurate record, e.g. a death mask or life mask, or image of a prospective wife
Self-Portrait	as model, or artist, or man/woman, allegory of painting/sculpture

Also think about **style**.