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## TEACHING KIT

# What is Art?

Defining Art through  
Visual Texts

*Exploring the use of  
fine art visual images  
for appreciation and  
analysis.*

# Why is Visual Literacy Important?

Visual literacy is the way students make meaning from still or moving visual texts. It involves the use of photographs, posters, artworks, film and other visual texts in learning.

Visual text is the new language we use today to communicate and learn. Since it was founded in October 2010, more than 50 billion photos have been uploaded to Instagram alone\*.

Visual literacy not only improves creative and critical thinking skills, but also nurtures our ability to empathise with others and understand technology.

Nearly 30% of the brain's cortex is devoted to visual processing and 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual.

With so much of the brain wired to visual processing, it is essential that visual literacy plays a more important role in our teaching and learning.

When examining visual texts with your students, there are a few considerations:

## Examine the Visual Text as a Whole

By asking a range of questions you can determine the context for a visual text and examine it as a whole.

- What is the purpose of the visual text?
- Where does this visual text come from? E.g. Part of a sequence
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is it about?
- What are your thoughts about it? Why?
- What are your feelings about it? Why?
- Does it remind you of anything?
- Can you connect it to any experience or previous knowledge?
- How do you think the visual text positions the viewer/reader?

## Making Meaning from a Visual Text

Three levels can be used when making meaning from a visual text:

1. **Literal:** At this level a student locates information, the answer appears in the image.
2. **Inferential:** At this level the student infers information using their previous knowledge to make an inference about the visual text.
3. **Evaluative:** At this level the students will hypothesise and evaluate. This will require them to think both critically and creatively.



## What is art? Are there rules around what can be considered art? Let's try to find the answer through an analysis of fine art as visual texts.

Is there a painting or performance that you consider art, only to find that you are the only one who seems to think so? This is because unlike much of the world that we experience through our senses, art cannot be as easily defined.

Throughout history, the changes that reshaped our society also affected our

art. New technology, audiences and ways of thinking led to ongoing debate about what, how and why art is made.

In 1961, American artist Andy Warhol created a series of paintings of a soup can. Almost half a century before that, French artist Marcel Duchamp began redrawing the boundaries around what could be designated art by creating a sculpture called "Bicycle Wheel". It was in fact, just an ordinary bicycle wheel.

Where art may have once been used for decoration, record keeping or propaganda, people today more often think of art as a form of expression, both for the artist and the observer.

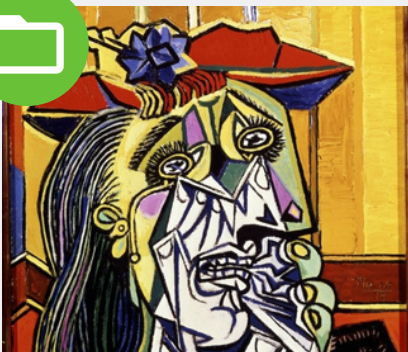

This activity series will study various artworks, styles and movements within this framework, using visual texts sourced from Britannica ImageQuest™.

## Learning Outcomes

- Conceptualise and analyse artistic ideas and work.
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Identify ways in which artists draw upon the past, present and the future as a source of inspiration.
- Describe the visual devices and techniques used within each piece.

## Activities

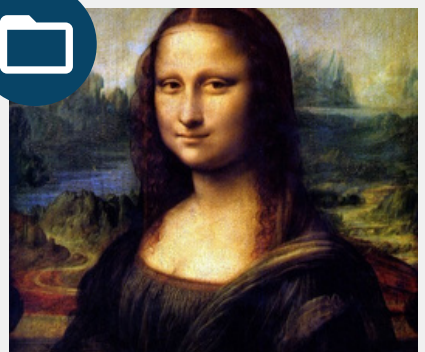

Each activity in this series includes a selection of visual texts from Britannica ImageQuest and suggested questions you can use to inspire inquiry and visual literacy.



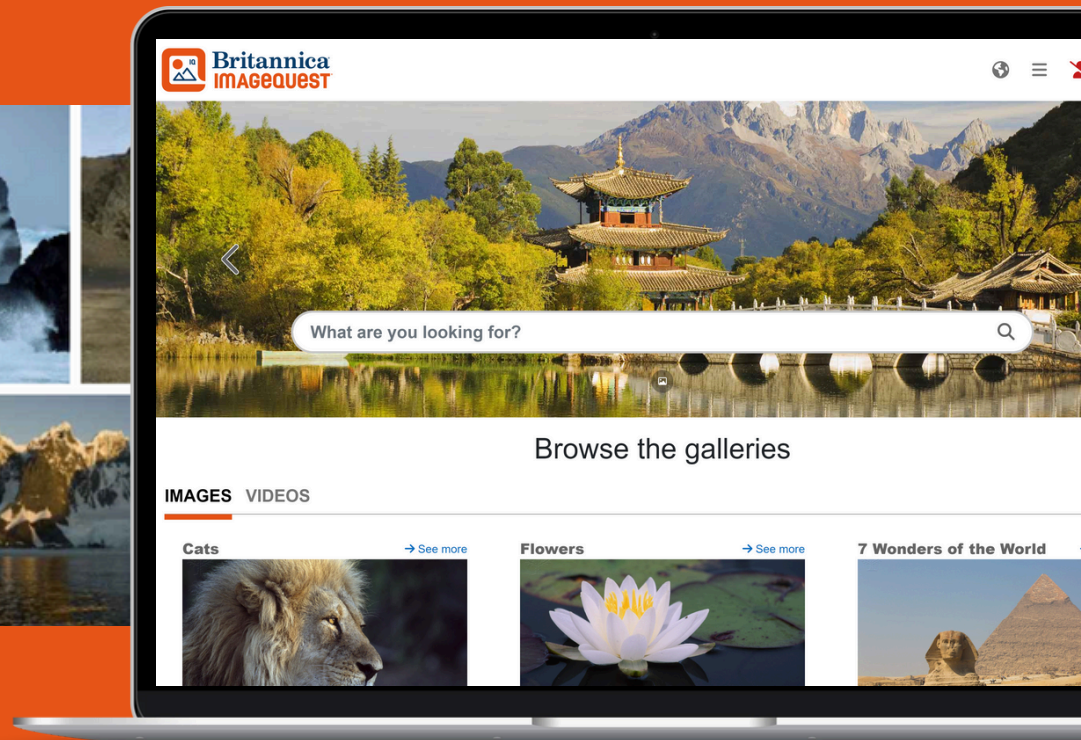
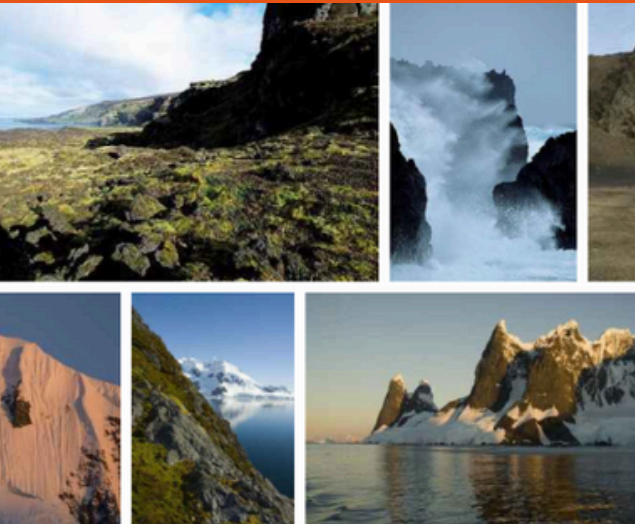
Primary  
**Cubism**



Middle  
**Composing a Landscape**



High  
**A Portrait is Worth a Thousand Words**



You can find all the visual texts used in this activity series in **Britannica ImageQuest™** - the world's most respected media libraries, curated into one safe database for education.

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**...and more!**

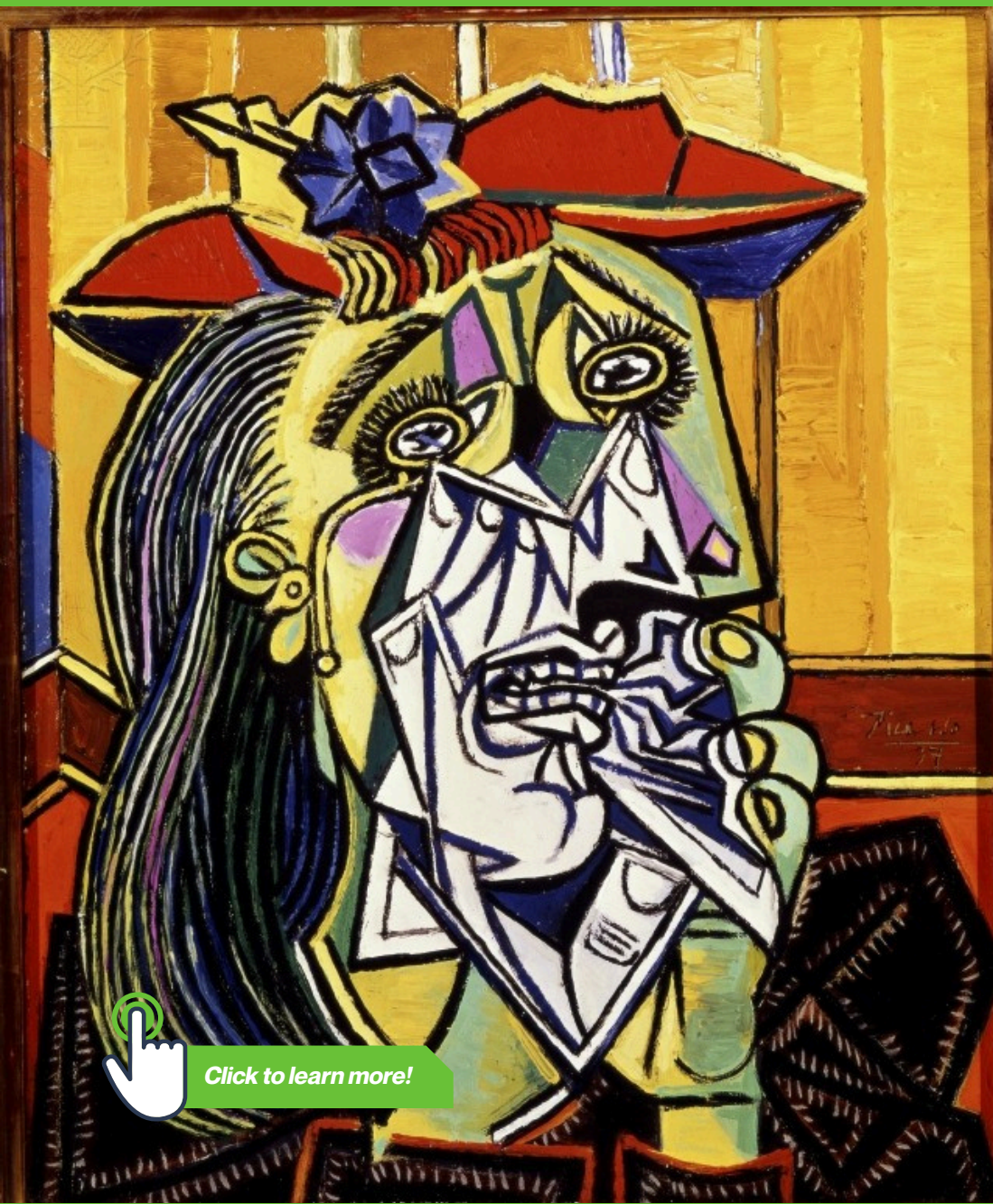


# Cubism



## Primary Level Activity

The first part of our activity series will explore cubism as a style of art, with particular attention to the artist who pioneered the movement - Pablo Picasso.



The Weeping Woman by Pablo Picasso, 1937.

Cubism was one of the most influential art styles of the 20th century. Cubist artists broke away from imitating nature in their art and instead depicted radically fragmented objects. Often, views of a subject from several different angles would be shown together.

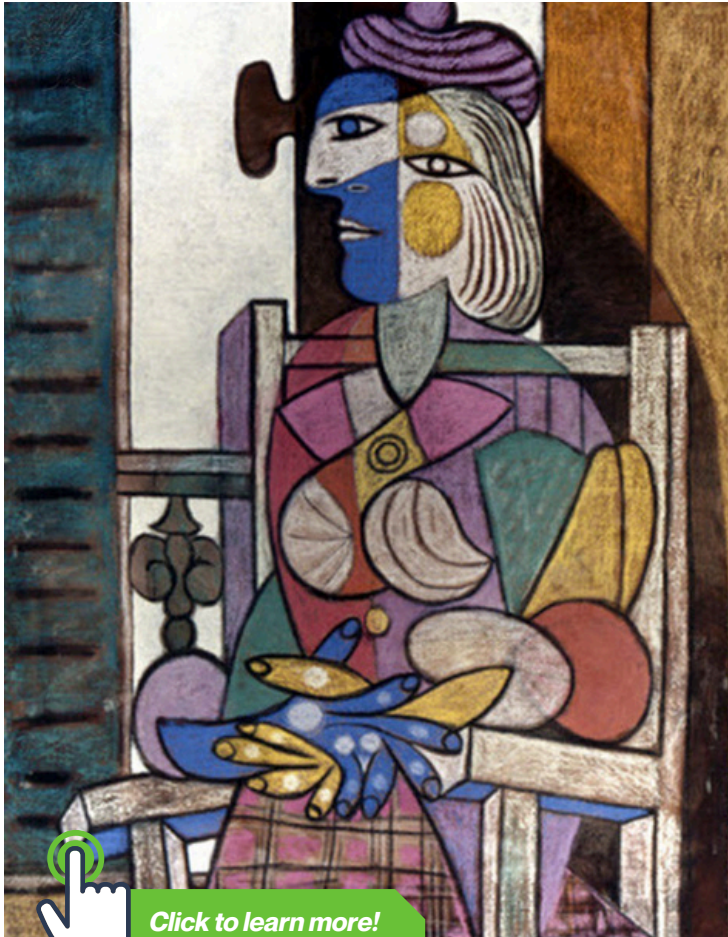
*The Weeping Woman by Pablo Picasso, 1937, 1881-1973, UK, London, Tate Gallery Painting Details: 1937 - oil on canvas - Tate Gallery, London, England Artist Details: Picasso, Pablo, 1881 - 1973, Spanish SuperStock/ Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*



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Explore these primary source visual texts from ImageQuest using the suggested questions.



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**Woman Seated Before a Window. Oil, pastel on canvas, 1937.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



**Mandolin and Guitar. Oil and sand on canvas, 1924.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



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# Suggested Questions

## Literal

1. What is happening in this painting?
2. What do you see that supports your ideas?
3. What is the artist trying to portray?
4. Take another look, what do you notice that you didn't earlier?
5. Write some objective statements to describe the work.

## Inferential

1. What is one word that comes to mind when viewing these paintings?
2. Why did you choose that word to describe the painting?
3. What do you want to know more about when you look at it?
4. Who is the artist that created these works?

## Evaluative

1. How do the paintings make you feel?
2. How do you think the artist may have intended the audience to react?
3. How did Cubists push the boundaries of 'traditional' still lifes and portraits?
4. Why do you think the artist chose to paint in this way?
5. Why do you think this style of art was so influential?

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**The images in this activity have been sourced from Britannica ImageQuest. Below is citation information for each image.**

NO PICASSO: WOMAN, 1937. - Pablo Picasso: Woman Seated Before a Window. Oil, pastel on canvas, 1937. Fine Art. The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.

PICASSO: MANDOLIN. - Pablo Picasso: Mandolin and Guitar. Oil and sand on canvas, 1924. PICASSO: MANDOLIN. - Pablo Picasso: Mandolin and Guitar. Oil and sand on canvas, 1924. Fine Art. The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.



# Composing a Landscape



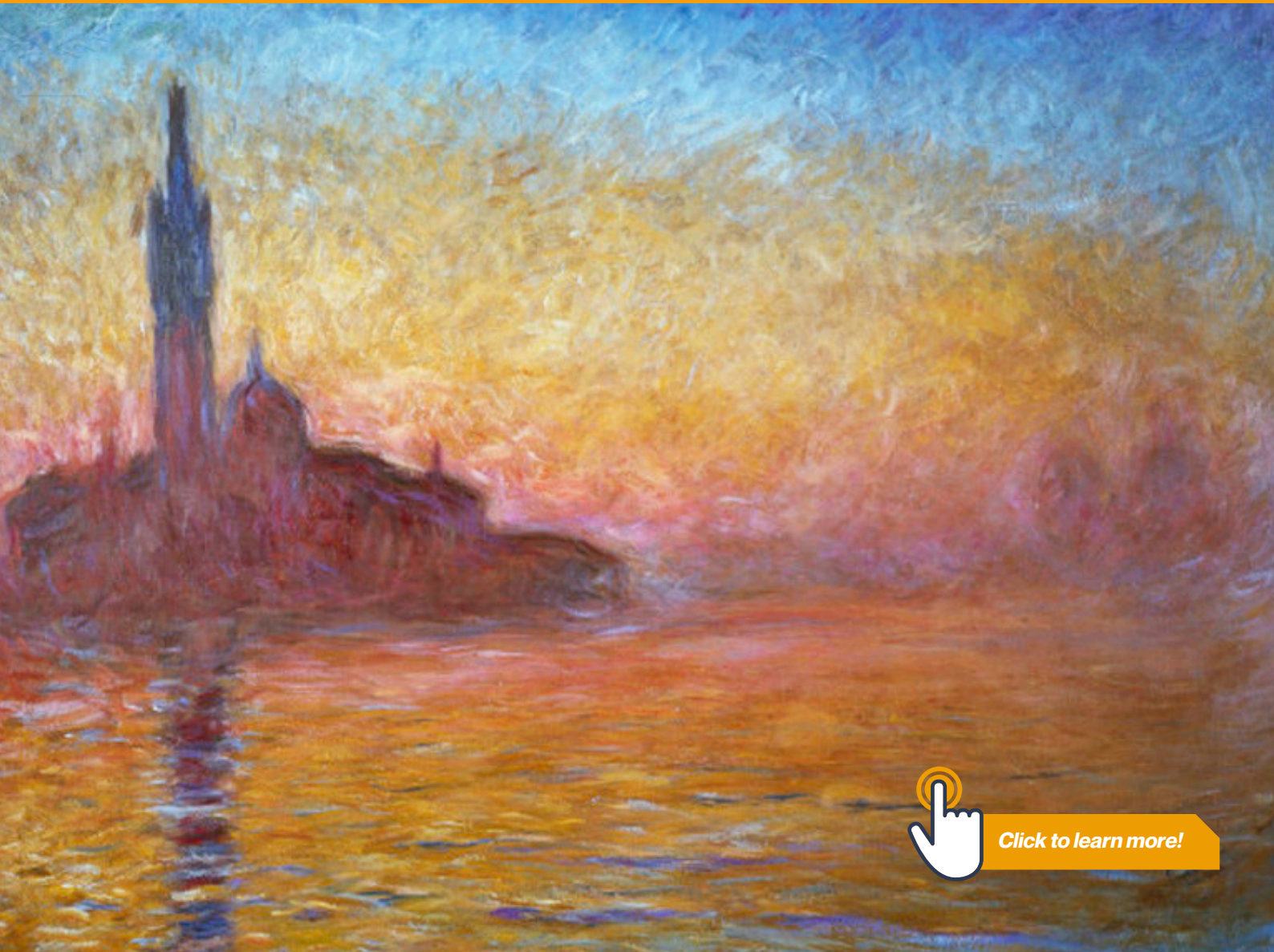
## Middle Level Activity

The second part of our activity series studies landscape paintings from Australian and European artists over the last two centuries.



C.Monet, Dusk in Venice, 1908 Monet, Claude, 1840-1926. 'Crepuscule a Venise' (Dusk in Venice), 1908. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm.

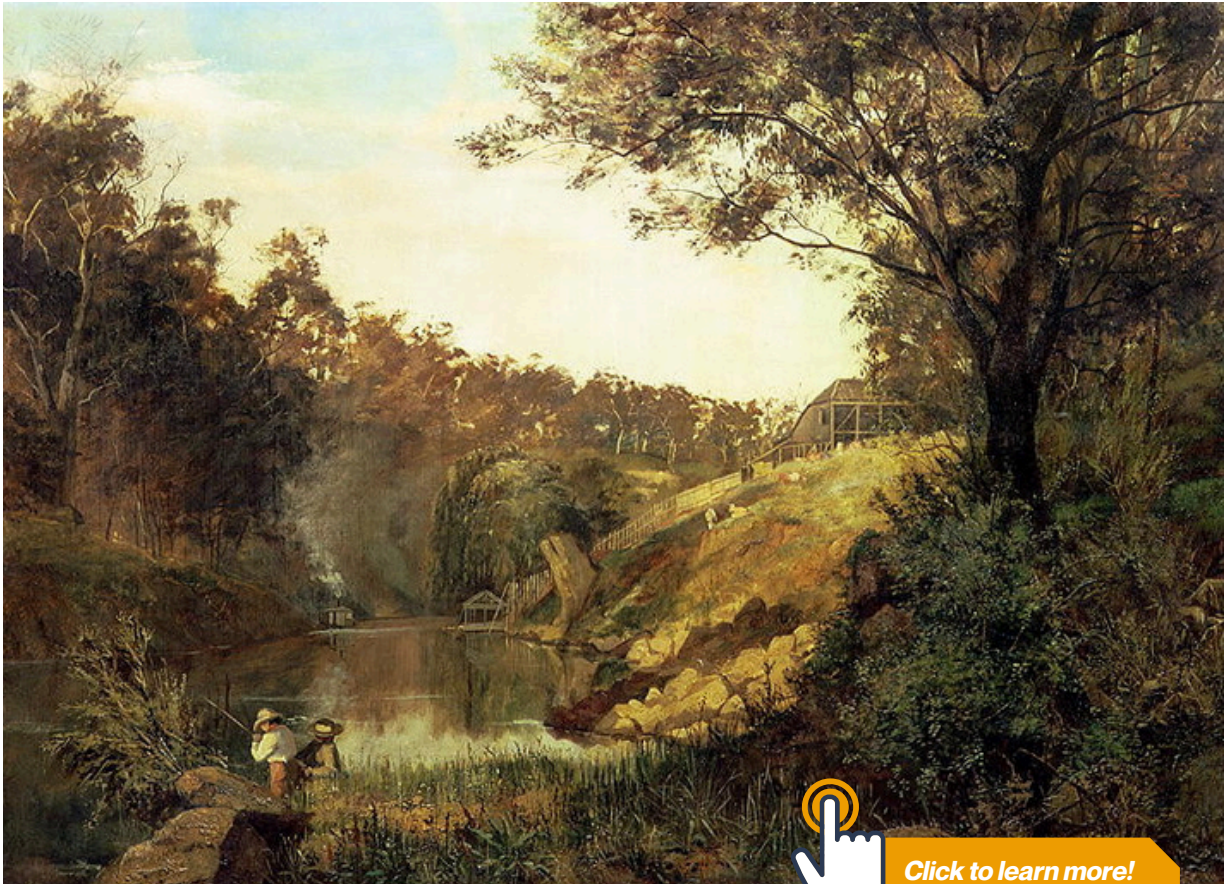
*C.Monet, Dusk in Venice, 1908. Fine Art. Andre Held / akg-images / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*



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Explore these primary source visual texts from ImageQuest using the suggested questions.



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**The Yarra, Studley Park.**  
**McCubbin, Frederick (1855-1917).**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



**Namatjira, Albert;**  
**"Landscape", c.1968.**  
Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



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**Vincent Van Gogh: The Starry Night. Oil on canvas, 1889.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



# Suggested Questions

## Literal

1. Look at each painting from a distance. What do you notice? Look at each painting close up. What do you notice now?
2. What do you see in the piece? Where does your eye go first?
3. Describe the art elements i.e. colour, line, shape, tone, form and texture and design principles i.e. focal point, space, rhythm, variety, unity, balance, most important in the work. What visual effects do they create?
4. What is going on in the foreground, the middle ground and the background?
5. What strategies has the artist used to communicate a sense of space?
6. What evidence of the human world do you see in this landscape?

## Inferential

1. What would it be like to spend a day in each of these landscapes?
2. Describe the relationship between humans and the natural world in the scene.
3. Who do you think was the audience for this item? Why?
4. What mood is conveyed in the landscape? How does the artist achieve this?

## Evaluative

### Australian Landscapes

Landscape paintings hold an important place in Australian art. Artworks by Indigenous Australians reflect powerful connections to country, early post-settlement landscapes recorded the compelling features of the Australian geography and more contemporary works depict an environment in crisis.

1. Why has the landscape and environment played an important role in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian art?
2. What might have inspired the artist to make this artwork?

## Research Opportunities

Artists can inspire writers and inspire artists. Examine Vincent Van Gogh's painting 'The Starry Night' and read the poem of the same name by Anne Sexton.

### The Starry Night

Anne Sexton

*That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars. Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother.*

The town does not exist  
except where one black-haired tree slips  
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.  
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.  
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons  
to push children, like a god, from its eye.  
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,  
sucked up by that great dragon, to split  
from my life with no flag,  
no belly,  
no cry.

1. How did van Gogh's painting inspire Sexton's poetry?
2. Create a poem based on your own response to Vincent Van Gogh's painting.

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**The images in this activity have been sourced from Britannica ImageQuest. Below is citation information for each image:**

*The Yarra, Studley Park. Christie's Images / Bridgeman Art Library / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*

*Albert Namatjira, Landscape. Photo. akg Images / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*

*VAN GOGH: STARRY NIGHT. - Vincent Van Gogh: The Starry Night. Oil on canvas, 1889. Fine Art. The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*

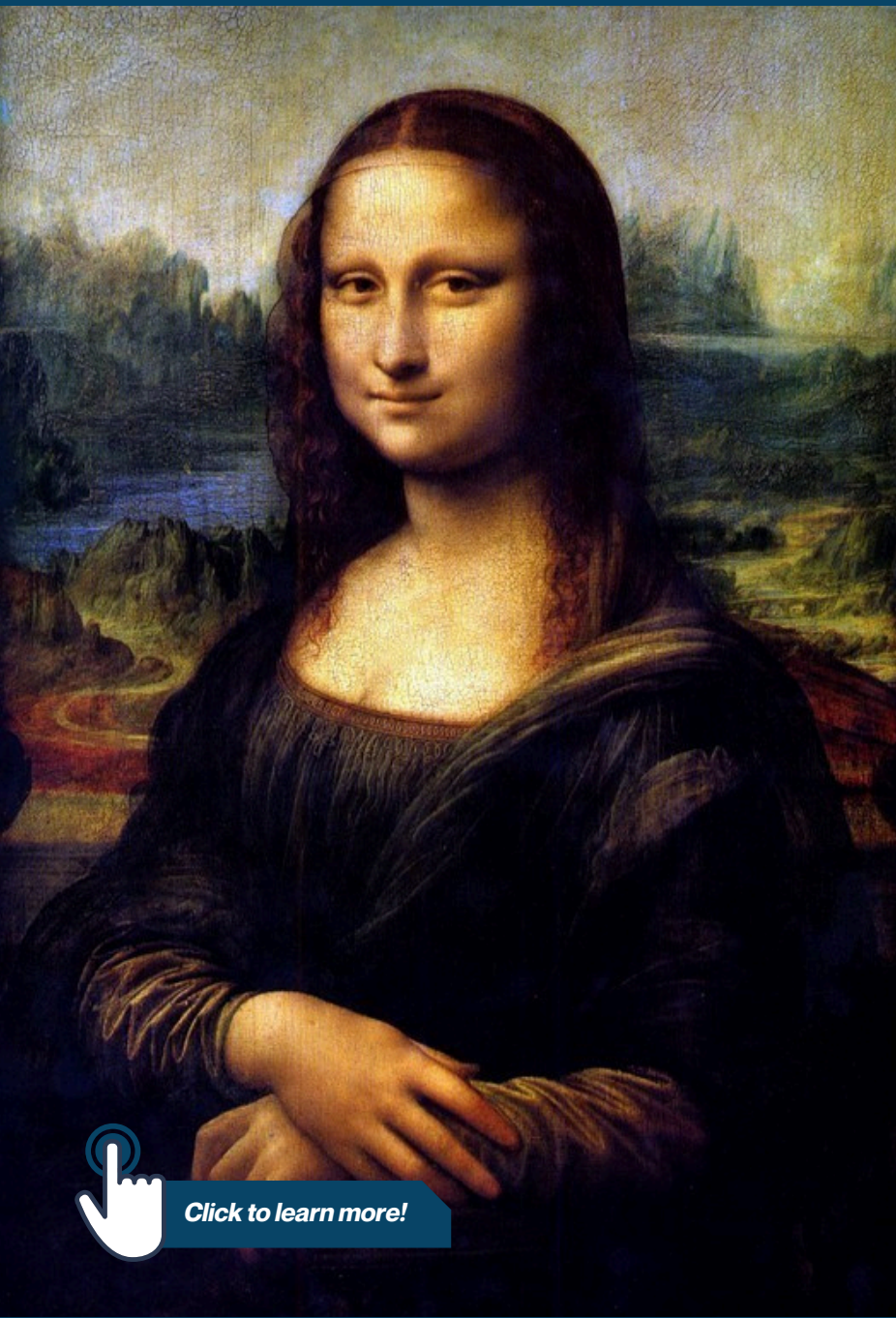


# A Portrait is Worth a Thousand Words



## High Level Activity

Even as the invention of photography changed its practices forever, portraiture has always been considered among the highest achievements in painting. This activity will focus on an in-depth analysis of famous portrait pieces and paintings of the human figure.



Mona Lisa, also called Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, Italian La Gioconda, or French La Joconde, oil painting on a poplar wood panel by Leonardo da Vinci, is probably the world's most famous painting.

It was painted sometime between 1503 and 1519, when Leonardo was living in Florence, and it now hangs in the Louvre Museum, in Paris, where it remained an object of pilgrimage in the 21st century.

The sitter's mysterious smile and her unproven identity have made the painting a source of ongoing investigation and fascination. *(Britannica School)*

*Mona Lisa painting.  
Photograph. Universal History  
Images\UIG. Britannica  
ImageQuest, Encyclopædia  
Britannica, 25 May 2016.*



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Explore these primary source visual texts from ImageQuest using the suggested questions.



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**Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica

**'The Girl with a Pearl Earring.'** Oil on canvas,  
**Johannes Vermeer, c1665.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica



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**GALATEA OF THE  
HEAVENS. - Salvador  
Dali, 1952.**

Britannica ImageQuest,  
Encyclopædia Britannica

## Suggested Questions

### Literal

1. If you were going to describe this work to someone who had never seen it, what adjectives would you use? Why?
2. How did the artist choose to represent the details in the portrait?
3. Who is the intended audience? How do you know?
4. What symbols are used in this portrait? What do you think they represent?
5. Describe the visual devices used in the artworks.
6. What is the style of this painting? Identify some of the features in this painting that influence your decision.
7. The artist has used primary and secondary colours. Name and categorise the colours. Tints and shades have also been used.

## Inferential

1. How do you interpret the expressions/gestures?
2. What did the artists want other people to know about this person in the portrait?
3. Did the artist create your portrait from direct observation, from memory, or from a photograph?  
How do you know?
4. What is the artist trying to communicate? Explain
5. Are there any clues about where these people may live or their culture?

## Evaluative

1. What are your emotions/feelings when you look at this artwork? Which part of the painting evokes those emotions/feelings?
2. Some of the portraits have backgrounds, some people in the portraits are holding objects or wearing specific items of clothing. What might this be telling or showing the audience about the person in the portrait?

## Research Opportunities

1. Create a portrait to tell a viewer about themselves without drawing their face and to give their art more personal meaning.
2. Create a portrait using two styles such as pop art and modernism.

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**The images in this activity have been sourced from Britannica ImageQuest. Below is citation information for each image:**

*Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird. Photograph. Album / Fine Art Images. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 22 Oct 2018.*

*VERMEER: EARRING, c1665. 'The Girl with a Pearl Earring.' Oil on canvas, Johannes Vermeer, c1665. As it appeared after being restored in 1994. Photograph. Granger, NYC / The Granger Collection. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 31 Aug 2017.*

*GALATEA OF THE HEAVENS. - Salvador Dali: Galatea of the Heavens. Oil on canvas, 1952.. Fine Art. The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.*



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