



## Exeter College Summer Programme 2025 How to Read Paintings



### Course Description

This course develops skills which enhance our interpretation, appreciation and enjoyment of paintings. Lectures combine in-depth visual analysis with art historical understanding, imparting students with the skills and confidence to engage critically and creatively with paintings from a range of eras and places. They incorporate other visual arts (sculpture, drawing, installation art, for instance), where these have been relevant to methods and histories of painting, as well as modern and contemporary strategies of display and exhibition-making. Throughout, there is some focus on histories of British art and art collections in Britain (especially public collections accessible to students, in Oxford or London), though the course aims to give students a rounded understanding of painting made in prominent art centres, especially across Britain, Western Europe, and the United States.

Six seminars deepen students' understanding of ways of making and seeing. Texts discussed include key texts of feminist and social art history, semiotics, opinion pieces, literary readings and artists' statements. Students are encouraged to develop their own interpretations of paintings, and to consider both their historical significances and their relevancies to present day concerns. In lectures, seminars, tutorials and presentations, they are encouraged to write and speak about paintings succinctly, fluidly and with some originality and flair.

The course is designed to be suitable for students of all disciplines who have a strong interest in art history, painting and museum and gallery collections. No previous knowledge of art history is required.

### Course Objectives

The aim of the course is to cultivate and develop students':

- skills and confidence to engage critically and creatively with paintings

- understanding of key historic and contemporary artists and art movements, with some emphasis on Britain and British collections
- understanding of the history of ‘ways of seeing’
- critical skills of object analysis and painting analysis
- ability to ground analysis, argument and interpretation in critical thinking and historical understanding
- ability to write and speak fluidly about artworks, and to present artworks to others in engaging ways
- ability to develop original research and write original analyses

### Teaching Methods

- 12 x 1.25 hr lectures
- 6 x 1.25 hr seminars
- 4 x 1.25 hr tutorials, paired or in a group of three

**Assessment:** An essay of no more than 3,000 words (40%), a final three-hour written examination (40%), oral presentation (10%) and participation in class discussion (10%).

### Lecture Schedule

1. Introduction
2. Painting, Collage and the Readymade: Dada and Cubism
3. Composition
4. Style and Technique
5. Signs and Symbols
6. The Artist
7. The Portrait
8. Landscape
9. Narrative
10. Still Life
11. Abstraction and the Display of Modern Art
12. Conclusions

### Indicative Bibliography

- Barringer, T., ‘Landscape Then and Now’, *British Art Studies*, issue 10 (2018).
- Barthes, R., ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967, various translations)
- Clark, T. J., ‘Veronese’s “Allegories of Love”’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 7, (April 2014).
- Hall, S., ‘Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-War History’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 61 (Spring 2006).
- Heidegger, M., ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1930s, various translations).
- Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (2009).
- O’Doherty, B., *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1999).
- Poggi, C., ‘Frames of Reference: “Table” and “Tableau” in Picasso’s Collages and Constructions’, *Art Journal*, vol. 47, no.4 (1988).

Pollock, G., *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (1988).  
Schapiro, M., 'The Nature of Abstract Art', *Marxist Quarterly*, no. 1 (1937).



Images:

Pere Borrell del Caso, *Escaping Criticism*, 1874.

Claudette Johnson, *Standing Figure with African masks*, 2018.