



Exeter College Summer Programme 2026

How to Read Paintings



Dr Rachel Rose Smith

This course develops skills which enhance our interpretation, appreciation and enjoyment of paintings. Lectures combine in-depth visual analysis with historical understanding, imparting students with the skills and confidence to engage critically and creatively with paintings from a range of historical eras and countries. They refer to other visual arts (e.g. sculpture, drawing, installation art) where relevant to the methods and histories of painting, as well as to strategies of display and exhibition-making. Throughout, there is some focus on histories of British art and British art collections, and, where possible, on paintings on display in Oxford or London.

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. Lectures, seminars, tutorials and presentations help students to develop new ways to write and speak about paintings succinctly and fluidly.

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

Teaching methods and assessment:

- 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

Final assessment:

One written essay of no more than 3,000 words (40%)

One final three-hour hand-written exam (40%)

One oral presentation to seminar class of around 8 minutes (10%) (mark out of 10)

Overall attendance and class participation (10%) (mark out of 10)

You need to pass all of the above four elements in order to pass the course.

Lecture topics:

1. Introduction
2. Cubism and Mode of Address
3. Composition and Gaze
4. Signs and Symbols
5. Landscape: Empire, Modernity, Diaspora
6. Narrative
7. Portraits
8. Artists and Identity
9. Abstraction
10. The Display of Art
11. Still Life
12. Conclusions

Indicative reading list:

Alpers, Svetlana, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Barlow, Clare (ed.), *Queer British Art*, Tate, 2017.

Barrell, John, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Clark, T.J., *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, Princeton University Press, 1985.

Fritsch, Lena, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Sudanese Artist in Oxford*, Ashmolean Museum, 2018.

Jackson, David, *Christen Kobke: Danish Master of Light*, Yale University Press, 2010.

Hall, Stuart, 'Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three "Moments" in Post-War History', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 61 (Spring 2006).

Klonk, Charlotte, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, Yale University Press, 2009.

Paul, Celia, *Self-Portrait*, Jonathan Cape, 2019.

Poggi, Christine, 'Frames of Reference: "Table" and "Tableau" in Picasso's Collages and Constructions', *Art Journal*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Winter 1988).

Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, Routledge, 1988.

Smiles, Sam, *Turner and the Slave Trade*, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2025.

Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford University Press, 1975.