

## Meditation and Art – The Conscious Perception of the Great Works of Painting

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### Abstract

*The great masters of painting have themselves revealed that their works conceal exceptional power. To access this potency requires a special approach; the work's image must be perceived and understood in all its depth. However, today's museum visits are often characterized by how many works of art can be viewed in as short a period as possible, leaving little time to truly focus on the paintings, or to appreciate them in detail. Many visitors also lack the expertise that might enable them greater access to a painting. To bridge this gap, guided museum tours can be helpful, but the imparting of mere facts about the works in question can potentially create obstacles to one's personal access, as it excessively directs the process of perception. It's important that space remains for the image itself to be discovered. Efforts in the field of art education must take these aspects into account.*

*"Meditation and Art" presents a method that enables conscious perception of the paintings of the great masters. Through concentration and focus, the observer is able to access the inner architecture of a great work of art, complementing the usual technical and historical analysis of a painting. Thus mindfulness and meditation are effective tools that can add a new dimension to the appreciation and understanding of these masterpieces. This new form of art education includes four distinct parts: (I) walking meditation and silence meditation, (II) describing the image / aspects of a work, (III) an artwork's historical development / stylistic contexts, (IV) final meditation.*

*"Meditation and Art" was presented for the first time at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum in 2017. Public workshops, private guided tours as well as university seminars have since been held in several major museums in Europe, and have met with great enthusiasm by participants. This article describes the approach based on a detailed case study.*

**Keywords:** *Mindfulness, Old Masters, painting, meditation, museum tour.*

### 1. Introduction

*My affairs follow the course allotted to them on high*  
Albrecht Dürer

It has often been noted that the great masters of both painting and music appear to draw their inspiration from a connection with the Divine. When asked from where he derived his inspiration, the composer Johannes Brahms is known to have said: "Not I, the Father that dwelleth within me, He doeth the works." (Abell 1994, p. 4). In response to criticism from a concertmaster who had complained during the first rehearsal of a new composition that a certain passage for the left hand was too demanding for anyone to play, Beethoven replied: "When I composed that passage, I was conscious of being inspired by God Almighty." (Abell 1994, p. 3). Mozart, too, saw himself in these "higher spheres". Once asked how he composed, he replied, "The process with me is like a vivid dream." (Abell 1994, p. 6)

In painting, we also find such evidence. A court painter of the Medicis and art historian, Vasari said of Raphael, "With the beauty of its figures and the nobility of its painting, the work seems to breathe the breath of divinity, with astonishes anyone who examines it intently, causing them to wonder how the human mind working with the imperfect medium of simple colours could, with the excellence of design, make objects in a painting seem alive." (Vasari 2008, pp. 315-316)

And it has been said of Rembrandt that the starting point for his work was the "exaltation of his soul" (Némo N/S, p. 16).<sup>1</sup> As noted in the introductory quote of this article, Dürer was also aware of a higher

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<sup>1</sup> See also Némo N/S, p 70.



source of inspiration, and expressed that conviction in words he painted alongside the date in his self-portrait of 1493.<sup>2</sup>

According to the great masters of music and painting themselves, their works conceal a special power, and uncovering it requires a special approach. In the case of music, this requires that the listener really listen to the music, consciously, giving full attention to the musical themes, moods and turning points.<sup>3</sup> And when viewing artwork, it's about perceiving and understanding the image, in all its depth. It's extraordinary that, through museums, we have the original painting before our very eyes, just as the artist created it, with the exception of changes or repairs made to the image over time. Without a filter, it's possible to perceive the manner in which the artist was inspired, and through the use of color, composed.

Museum visits are today often characterized by the fact that in a short period of time, for example on a Sunday afternoon, visitors try to view as many works of art as possible. Some museum visitors occupy themselves with photographing the paintings, leaving even less time to really observe them, and to appreciate them in detail.

Many visitors also lack the expertise that might enable them greater access to a painting. Text panels stating the date the piece was created, and a brief introductory text are not sufficient here. Guided tours of the museum can be useful, but the communicating of mere facts about the works in question potentially creates obstacles to one's personal access, as it excessively directs the process of perception. It's important that space remains for the image itself to be discovered. The Scottish painter Benjamin Creme once said that to know what the picture is about can provide a "way in" for the viewer; but to know what a picture is about is not the same thing as to experience the painting." (Creme 2017, p. 13).

During my public workshops and private tours, which have taken place at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, at the Dresden Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, and as well as at weekly university seminars at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, I have observed that participants appear to enjoy the short meditative exercises. The "Meditation and Art" approach was presented for the first time through a short presentation and workshop at the international "Museum Guides Now!" Symposium at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum in 2017.

## 2. Method

Above all, "meditative stillness" plays an important role in the "Meditation and Art" method; this is especially important state to develop before one approaches a painting to view it, then while looking at it, and even after viewing it. The silence before and after viewing a picture is achieved through an inner centering, developed for example by the method of concentrating on one's own breath. The silence during viewing is created by focusing entirely on the different characteristics of the picture. In this way, the viewer enters into an inner dialogue with the image, in which an attempt is made, as far as possible, not to be distracted by rambling thoughts and/or emotions that are not related to one's perception of the image itself. The merging that results gives us the opportunity to take the entire image in, and to perceive its particular individual charisma, beyond its myriad characteristics.

### Part I: Walking meditation and silence meditation

There are specific techniques that can help develop the attitude of serenity, mindfulness, and inner calmness essential to the in-depth consideration of a painting. Beginning at the entrance to a museum, one should not be distracted by the many impressions and visitors. Here walking meditation can be effective: when we walk toward a picture, we pay attention to our feet and to the steps we take. The more focused we are, the less distracted we are from the objects, people or sounds around us. When we arrive at the picture, we devote our attention to our own breath, for a few minutes, with our eyes closed. Only then, once we are centered, do we take a closer look at the painting.

### Part II: Picture description / aspects of a work

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<sup>2</sup> See Dürer's Self-Portrait of 1493, note the adage, next to the date: *My sach die gat / Als es oben schtat* – which means *My affairs follow the course allotted to them on high* (see Eichler 2016, p. 19).

<sup>3</sup> An excellent way to tap classical music through conscious listening is offered by the international Musicosophia School in Sankt Peter (Germany), [www.musicosophia.com](http://www.musicosophia.com)

The next step entails describing the painting. The following aspects should be considered:<sup>4</sup>

- Color
- Composition
- Light and shadow / brightness / contrast
- Expression
- Technique / painting style
- Shape / figures / items

In small groups, we focus on one aspect of the work, in more detail. Each group is then given enough time to engage with respective aspects discovered. Then, all the groups' findings are compiled. Afterwards, the groups present their thoughts. These presentations can be supplemented and extended by the other groups as well as the course leader, after each group has presented. Rather than being influenced by historical information about the painting from the very start, participants are encouraged to develop their own approach and perceptions about the painting.

With regard to the aspect of composition, we examine how the artist composed his image; that is, how the colors and shapes are composed in relation to each other, and how the entire surface of the image is allocated. In this way, we can examine in more detail the painting's central axes, diagonals and the golden section - which induces the greatest possible harmony in the image. The next level of observation examines the basic shapes; triangles, circles and ovals present in the image. We can then study the free lines in the image. Each artist applies these elements in his/her own unique way.

By examining the aspects of form / figures / objects we can distinguish the elements proportion, materiality / texture as well as other details. The question considered here is: to what extent are the forms in line with reality? Are they rather simplified, or even completely abstract? For example, are figures displayed in the correct proportions or are they rather distorted? Are the surfaces of the various items in the image, such as clothing, skin, wood and stone, fabric or texture represented differently, or in the same manner?

### **Part III: An artwork's historical development / stylistic contexts**

After describing the image, the third part of this method considers the work's historical details; the name of the artist, the year of the work's creation, its size, the style of painting, its museum location. These details can usually be found on a text panel next to the picture. In order to correctly describe the painting's *iconography* - its objects and their respective meanings, as well as its *iconology*,<sup>5</sup> relating the contents of the entire image to the context of the time, more information on the image and artist is necessary. During what era was the image created? During which phase of life did the artist create the work? Who inspired the artist in his career? Why did the artist paint his work in this way? What does the artist want to say with his picture?

### **Part IV: Final meditation**

At the end, we conclude our contemplation of the painting with a short silent meditation, in which we try to see the image again, in our minds.

## **3. Outlook**

"I have goose bumps!", said a participant in the Alte Pinakothek while viewing Dürer's "Selbstbildnis im Pelzrock". "He looks at me with so much calm and strength and somehow right through me!" The other group participants add: "To me, he's looking sideways!", "No, I think he's looking at me!", "To me, it's serenity and eternity! "

In all previous workshops and private tours there were exciting dialogues with participants about the discussed masterpieces. "I've never been to a museum," said an over 80-year-old participant in the

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief explanation of various key movements, works, themes and techniques, see Hodge, S. (2018).

<sup>5</sup> See Patsch 2018, S. 141. See also Battistini, M. (2005): Symbols and Allegories in Art. Getty Publications. Los Angeles. The other editions of this series also offer numerous examples of iconography and iconology.



workshop, who was impressed with this innovative intuitive approach to a painting. "This image, and above all this expression in Rembrandt's eyes, touched me a great deal." The depth with which he then described his experience of seeing Rembrandt's self-portrait from 1652 was very moving. That someone visiting a museum for the first time shared such a profound experience, marked a very special moment during the meditation-and-art workshop at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna in April 2018.

Overall, the participants are always amazed how much there is to discover in a painting. For example, the expressiveness of Rembrandt, the gentle choice of colors in Raphael, the compositions of Veronese or the influences of Mantegna, Bellini and Giorgione on the techniques of Titian, the discoveries are always fascinating. Students who learn to use the "Meditation and Art" approach in the context of seminars and then independently visit museums to view paintings and to share this technique with others, report that they do so with pleasure and curiosity and enjoy expanding their knowledge of certain paintings through guided tours at the museum, and through the internet and relevant scholarly literature. In addition to the different levels of meaning of a work, one also learns a lot about human thought and culture during the respective epochs. But the bottom line is that many participants report that they now look at paintings quite differently; that they have better access to them, and that it has made visiting museums more enjoyable.

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