

Art Society North West Norfolk

ART TEACHES

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The 4 pillars on which art education is usually based are creation, study, criticism and aesthetics, using tools, techniques and mediums to make hands-on works of art. Artworks are studied within their cultural, historical and geographical contexts to understand how human histories, societies, values and traditions have evolved over time. Through criticism critical skills in thinking and observation are developed and through analysis come the skills of interpretation and evaluation of quality. By exploring the philosophy behind works of art, comes the ability to question the beauty, the artistic value of the artwork and to ask questions; is it art, who says its art, do we even like it, why do we like it?

As a primary visual source Art informs, explains, persuades. It is used as an historical record, revealing social values, daily lives, political biases and emotional realities of past eras. Any student of the history of art can see an abundance of artists that are relatable to them in their struggles, their setbacks and their perseverance. Vincent Van Gogh is one for any artist struggling with mental health issues because his pictures were used as an expression of his inner turmoil. Initially he became an artist to help him get over the emotional trauma of his excommunication from his church. But his lack of success and loneliness resulted in further mental breakdowns and manic depression occurred. However, whilst committed to a mental asylum he painted some of his most famous works. They tended to be expressive and peaceful, like *The Starry Night*, which not only helped his mental health but also showed his tenacity. An example of art as therapy.

It is not only the history of the past shown through artworks. but some artists also use their creative skills to speak out about exploitation and injustice. One artist more famed for his political activism than his works alone is Ai Weiwei and his mantra 'everything is politics, everything is art'. He is renowned for creating works that speak out about exploitation and injustice, particularly the Chinese Government. His controversial sculpture 'Straight', 4 years in the making, and made from 200 tonnes of salvaged mangled steel rods from the rubble of the Sichuan earthquake, was created not only to commemorate some of the 70,000 people who lost their lives in the earthquake, but as a criticism of the Chinese Government's poor infrastructure, particularly in

schoolrooms, which exposed the school construction scandal whilst many government buildings remained intact. He courageously and defiantly used his art as a language to deal with problems. After the disaster Ai WeiWei bought tons of the twisted mangled steel and along with other craftsmen spent years straightening each bent rod back into a straight line by hand. For those involved it was an attempt to straighten a distorted truth and honour the lost lives.

Art can teach us fundamental lessons about perception, language and representation and one of the best examples of this is 'The Treachery of Images (1929) by Rene Magritte. Magritte is quoted as saying 'This is not a pipe' which is factually true as it cannot be smoked and it is only oil paint on canvas. But we interpret it as a pipe and Magritte reminds us never to rely on the human invention of language with what we see as being reality. The word 'pipe' or the depiction of a pipe is only a stand-in, not the real thing. When standing in front of any artwork we need to ask ourselves a series of questions if we really want to engage. 'What am I seeing here? How is it made? What is the story here? What does it mean to me?

The monumental Bayeux Tapestry stands as one of the most definitive masterpieces of art history. It was not only a school book to teach the masses, but it was also used as a powerful visual history lesson for a largely illiterate medieval population. Propaganda as well as education. This amazing document in stitch is currently on display for once in a lifetime at the British Museum, and if you would like to learn more, the Arts Society West Norfolk is hosting a talk entitled 'The Bayeux Tapestry – international relations, then and now' with Art Expert Hillary Williams, on Monday 12th October 2026, 2 pm, at Sedgeford Village Hall. Visitors welcome. Full details www.theartssocietynwnorfolk.org.uk