Think about reality, representation and abstraction.

What do paintings do? When we look at a painting of an object or person, do we think that that object is there before us? No, but would we recognise them from having looked at a painting of them.

Difference between a painting of a particular object and a painting of an object of a particular type. What do paintings generally show?

Cartoon. What is this saying about painting and reality?

That we cannot rely on a portrait and by inference a painting to present us with a true likeness – a true representation of reality.

The joke is that of course Mrs Hammond doesn’t look like her child’s portrait of her. How does Mrs Hammond appear in the picture – two dimensional, flat. In other words, she looks just like a picture.

But, of course, nothing looks like a picture – ie two dimensional.

The teacher is recognising Mrs Hammond as her portrait. The deeper point is that however much we might like to think otherwise, how we see an object in real life and how we see it in a painting are two completely different experiences.
Paintings are, therefore, not paintings of a particular object but are paintings of an object of a particular type. Mrs Hammond is not a picture of Mrs Hammond but a stereotypical child’s painting of his mother. When we paint a picture of something, we have in mind how that object would look best as a picture, rather than how we can produce a direct copy. i.e. we paint a picture having a prior image/picture in our mind.

i.e. We see a subject in a painting by means of an agreed way of looking - a consensus that we accept that one thing (the image) stands for the other (the real thing).

What paintings of things/people most resemble is other paintings of the same things.

So what are we doing when we try to represent reality in a painting?

Or is this an impossibility? If we cannot achieve realism through representation, why do we try?

Is it to show skill? In which case art becomes a sort of craft.

Or is it to demonstrate aesthetic imagination?

Van Eyck – Arnolfini Marriage. 1434

Paintings such as these are usually regarded as highly realistic but in what sense do we mean this. What is realism in painting?

Look more closely at Arnolfini Marriage and at van Eyck generally.

Van Eyck captured that court and the figures around it. He captures in paint the materiality of his surroundings in a way that we see as accurate. But it is only really accurate when compared with another painting – not with reality.

Although this is called the Arnolfini Wedding, the character of Arnolfini is incidental. It would work in the same way with another person from a similar background.

Van Eyck is not telling us much about Arnolfini himself but is telling us a lot about the culture of Bruges in the 15th century. Van Eyck’s paintings are telling us something about the richness of the Burgundian Netherlands. The materiality of the culture. The picture is operating as a sort of social history.

Van Eyck is making accurate images of the objects around him and how those objects look under certain different conditions. He is creating his own visual world.

Why was this image made and what does it mean? Its likeness or skill is irrelevant or only relevant in that it reflects the context it seeks to demonstrate.

**Jan Eyck and representation of material reality**

**Arnolfini Wedding 1434**

Fur (both in clothing and on the dog), silk, glass (in the window, the mirror and the beads), brickwork, wool, lace, metalwork, the flame of the candle. He is the first painter to capture so much of the detail of the rich world around him with such skill, delicacy and variety. Van Eyck is a great painter of materials, a really tactile painter.
**Madonna with Canon van der Paele**

Donor portrait. George van der Paele showing how devout he is by being portrayed having a vision of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus. He is being presented to the Virgin and Child by his patron saint George. Opposite him is Saint Donatian to whom a major church in Bruges had been dedicated. Van der Paele had given money, vestments, silverwork and liturgical books to that church. It is thought that the cross, mitre and the cope worn by the saint are those actually given by van der Paele to the church.

Van Eyck has filled every inch of the panel with detail, even richer than that of the Arnolfini portrait. It is a virtuoso performance. The virgin’s rich red robe with its deep folds. The cope with its blue and gold, and the candlelight reflecting on the cross and the jewels. The armour of St George with the red of the robe reflected in it. Skin on face of figures. (realistic cp with Giotto). The windows, carpet, drapery of the throne and the beautifully realised carving in stone and wood.

How does Van Eyck achieve this detail and the reflections and the different types of material so well.

**Van Eyck’s technique.** For a long time there was something of a myth that Van Eyck had invented oil painting. Before van Eyck, most painting on panel was done using pigment mixed with egg, but oil painting had been used as early as the twelfth century.

However, van Eyck took the technique of oil painting much further and was really the first to use it to the exclusion of other methods. His great leap forward was the mixing of the pigment with larger amounts of oil and so creating a thin paint.

On wood panel - white or pale grey ground, some additional white highlight on the ground.
Paint applied in a series of translucent glazes over the white ground. This allows the light to reflect off the ground through the translucent paint, giving an illuminated shimmering quality, the impression almost of stained glass.

Green dress in Arnolfini wedding. Two underlayers of verdigris pigment mixed with lead white and tin-lead yellow. Over the top, final translucent glaze of Verdigris in boiled linseed oil with pine resin.

Also because oil paint dries so slowly compared with egg, it can be blended to make soft shadows to suggest three dimensions. It can also be applied in different layers of thickness or thinness and worked while wet to create the illusion of reflection on different surfaces. Up to six layers or glazes.

But van Eyck is also getting these effects by a close observation of nature. He worked slowly and his ability to make us see all these materials in his paintings is as a result of a close study of how these things are made and appear to our eyes and how they appear in different lights etc. Van Eyck used and improved these techniques with such panache and bravado that it is as though he is a child with a new toy.

Van Eyck does not get the scale and perspective right. Figures are too big for their space. i.e. there is a limit to how accurately Van Eyck can present reality. **Why is this?**

Perhaps perspective and correct spatial representation wasn’t that important for van Eyck. He wanted to capture reality in different ways but, at the same time, preserve the notion of the illusion.

**Seeing as a process of scientific study and enquiry.**

Look at another aspect of the attempt to capture realism in paint in 15th century.

At same time as artists are using painting to show greater reality of materials through a close study of nature and the material world, they are also thinking about reality of the spatial world around us.
Perspective.

Masaccio. Holy Trinity

15th century Italy, architects exploring idea of subject receding from us and how they look smaller the further away they go.

Masaccio's Trinity in Florence is one of the earliest uses of geometric perspective. The vanishing point is just on the step just below the cross. Gives the impression of the roof and building drawing back into the wall and opening up a new space.

But the perspective does not appear completely accurate. It seems to fall away too sharply and steeply. This is because Masaccio has placed the main image in such a way that it looms over us so that we stand in awe of it – in a position of subservience before the supernatural. So this is a painting that combines objective scientific enquiry into the reality of perspective and then plays with it and undermines it to disorientate the viewer. It shows us a form of reality and then quickly withdraws it so that we are left in no doubt that this is an illusion. Masaccio is creating a sort of visual poetry.

Art can combine science and poetry, truth and imagination.
Leonardo – *Last Supper*. Geometry and perspective.

Most famous and best example from this time of how scientific enquiry and experimentation into perspective and geometry can be applied to painting. This is almost painting as science. Leonardo thought that painting was the highest art because it brought science to bear on what it did. (Next week we will see that Michelangelo thought much the same about sculpture and there was a major argument between the two positions throughout the Renaissance).

Look at perspective and vanishing point.

Look at mathematical structure. 12, 6, 4, 3.

*Last Supper* reflects new science and learning and his painting is objectively realistic.

But there is a sense with both Leonardo and Masaccio of artists playing with the new learning. Using the reality of scientific and visual experimentation so we become so aware of the technique that the art loses its realism. It is a mere illusion.

What these artists are doing is trying to show how this new scientific, natural world which was being discovered can be rendered in paint.
Constable. Doing something similar with his studies of nature.

His paintings of the landscape came from a long and very detailed study of nature and the effect of light on nature.

He said that “painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature”. Pictures were a form of scientific experiment for Constable.

He is studying light, geometry, colour, the structures of the natural world.

This is what Constable is doing when he said: “when I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I try to do is forget that I have ever seen a picture”.

In other words, he is painting nature as he really sees it rather than as seen through other paintings. He attempted to make the subject of his pictures look like the real thing rather than that thing as represented in other paintings. Is this possible?

He painted directly from nature. And his landscapes were therefore a conscious break with the subdued landscapes of the 17th and 18th centuries. Critics found his work garish and bright and rough. “Get rid of that nasty green thing”. Constable was being criticised for not painting like other paintings but trying to paint from reality and so show a new way of creating landscape in paint.

But in doing all this artists are combining it with a poetic imagination and pushing the boundaries of what art and the painted object can do. And what might be considered as a work of art. Science in the service of art. Partly to make us see the world in a different way but to see art in a different way.
Go back to Van Eyck who makes this sense of illusion explicit. He shows us that these paintings are about the illusion of art, not the objectively correct representation of scientific reality.

On the wall behind the couple is painted “Johannes de Eyck fuit hic” (“Jan van Eyck was here”).

Van Eyck is showing, I think, that all this, the accurate depiction of the beauty around him, is his own creation, it comes from him. Until now, painters either did not or could not depict the material world in such a heightened way so there was no point pretending. Van Eyck is saying, with these words, that the world around us can be accurately recreated but it is all an illusion dependent entirely on the skill of the painter. By explicitly telling us that the “artist was here” he is explaining that he is not recreating reality or representing it accurately but is creating a painting in which we can recognise reality but should not confuse it with the external world as we perceive it.

**These paintings are about van Eyck and his skill as a painter and his consciousness of that skill.** He is one of the first artists to think of himself self-consciously as an artist. And indeed, to complete the game, he even shows, in the mirror two people standing in front of the couple, one of whom, is surely van Eyck himself.

Van Eyck is playing with reality. What looks realistic is, in fact, an artistic illusion. When we start to recognise the painting as an illusion, we can see that painting has a freedom which releases it from the need to reflect reality in an absolute sense. It does not have to be accurate.

**Sometimes an image appears more realistic by actually presenting a falsehood about the object which has been represented.**
An artistic way of seeing the world has developed separately from our ordinary way of seeing. i.e. how we represent things is different from how we see them. There are different ways of seeing.

Almost as though the individual elements have been painted and then put together later as a sort of collage.

Surprisingly common with other painters:

Caravaggio – supper at Emmaus in NG. Right hand is a close up not reduced in size to take account of the fact that it is further away. The perspective is wrong but the overall picture looks real so we accept it.

Why is Caravaggio doing this with the man’s hands?

Dutch Flower painting – paint studies of individual flowers and put them together.

“Idealised realism” – all elements are realistic portrayals of the objects in their details but the overall conception and structure is idealised.
**Mantegna – Dead Christ.** There is a deliberate distortion in the foreshortening. If this was a true representation, then the head would be smaller and the feet larger but would the picture have the same impact?

This doesn’t actually tell is what a dead man laid out on a slab looks like. So the painting looks more real – at least more like our idea of what the reality is – than the reality it is supposed to represent. And it does this by being unrealistic in relation to the material world.

Painting is therefore freed from the need to conform to reality. It can create its own reality.

And this gives painting a huge physical and mental space in which to operate.

Painting is about illusion – distilling the world around us (or our imagination) into a limited two-dimensional space. How artists have approached the creation of this illusion is really the history of art.
Consider two ways of looking at how the external realism of the material world is altered to create a poetic and artistic realism in painting.

- **Analytical cubism**

Disassembled a human figure into a series of flat transparent geometric plates that overlap and intersect at various angles. The basic element of this style becomes the plane or facet - a small plate-shaped area, bounded by straight or curved lines, typically laid out in overlapping layers.

As though a cube has been taken apart and the parts set out flat. The edges of these planes fade and dissolve so that each one merges with the other.

Imagine these paintings as: a large number of photographs of an object, all from different angles and different times. These photographs are then cut up and rearranged almost at random on a flat surface, so that they overlap with each other.

**Metzinger. Tea time.**

Rejection of perspective. Show the object from multiple angles in different lights. More truthful than a single viewpoint because our understanding of an object is based on these multiple views as we move around it and see it from different angles.

We see more than one aspect of an object at the same time. The Cubist is not interested in usual representation. It is as if he were walking around the objects but he must represent all these views at once.

Cubism is about “creating new realities”. “A more real reality”.
• Gerhard Richter.

Richter shows us that art (in the form of the created image) is an unreliable guide to or reflection of reality.

From 1960s onwards, Richter has been making paintings from photographs. Richter’s work plays with our perception of image making. This looks like a photograph but is in fact a painting. A painting taken from a photograph. He blurs the line between artistic genres and plays into this sense of vagueness and questioning that images can raise.

Blurring is a metaphor for uncertainty and lack of precise reality. Richter is saying that you cannot really achieve pictorial reality even with a photograph. There is always something metaphorically blurred about it.


Gerhard Richter. Geseke. 1987

“I’ve never found anything to be lacking in a blurry canvas. Quite the contrary: you can see many more things in it than in a sharply focused image. A landscape painted with exactness forces you to see a determined number of clearly differentiated trees, while a blurry canvas you can perceive as many trees as you want. The painting is more open”.

Richter is therefore “obscuring the identities of the people (and objects) depicted and questioning the relationships between them”.

Richter describes the photograph as the ‘most perfect picture’ – a direct and objective way of representing world. But by creating blurred paintings from them, he is suggesting that it, in fact, this sort of perfection or objectivity is untruthful and ultimately unattainable.
Photo from 1933 – Richter (age 1) and 13 year old aunt. What do we see in this picture?

She was schizophrenic and murdered by Nazis. This picture has an additional layer of meaning by being created out of the earlier photograph. It therefore moves from being a happy family photograph to a painting of a child who (by the time of the painting) has had a tragic history. Overlaid with tragedy and darker meaning. So we are forced to question the intervening events between the photograph and the painting. What might mean one thing in the photograph means something else in the painting even though they show the same thing.

Playing with time. Is the subject matter the gap between the photograph and the painting – i.e. the lost story between the two? What we are seeing is what is missing. The face (which is present) forces us to confront what is absent.

Postscript to the picture.

**Heyde** - showing the arrest of the Nazi gynaecologist who was responsible for the death of aunt Marianne.

Richter’s portraits. Self portrait is painted as fully realised portrait and then the paint is scraped off very close to the canvas which leaves a ghostly presence. A preoccupation with uncertainty.
R is frustrating our desire to seek meaning in appearance. Therefore his work is open to a wide range of interpretations. He is showing the universal predicament which is the desire to understand the world and an inability to know anything with certainty.

Ambiguity. “You realise that you cannot represent reality at all – that what you make represents nothing but itself and therefore is itself reality”. “Reality will lay beyond reach”. The image is the reality at that moment but what it represents has passed and is no longer tangibly real. This undermines notions of the accuracy and realism of representation.

Is this close to what van Eyck is saying in the Arnolfini portrait with “Van Eyck was here”?

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**Renaissance – painting moves in two separate directions in Italy.**

**Disegno and colore**

design or drawing (It. *disegno*) and colour (*colore*). debate over whether the value of a painting lay in the idea originating in the artist’s mind (the invention), which was explored through drawings made prior to the painting’s execution, or in a more expressive way, achieved through colour and the process of painting itself.

- **Disegno**

A more scientific, geometric form of art based on a close observation of nature and a clear attempt to show an ideal representation of the what is in front of us.

This emphasis on order and close observation and representation of the world reached purest form with artists such as Raphael.
Belvedere Madonna.

Geometric forms, triangle. – science and geometry

Realistic landscape background showing perspective – looking at nature.

Twisting of bodies - reality and natural movement. From looking at human figure.

And a gentleness and serenity and a perfect painting technique. But is it too perfect? So perfect that it is not realistic? i.e. Idealism. Creating an idea of perfection and trying to show this. Concerned with perfection and purity of technique and design.

- Colore

In Venice, later in 16th century, a different way of showing the world in paint emerges. Painting achieved through, direct application of the paint rather than relying on drawing. So a freer feeling about the work.

Titian’s technique from about this time (1540s onwards). Works directly on panel or canvas. No significant underdrawings. Apply a limited palette of blacks, red, browns, yellows direct and with very quick brush strokes. Uses his fingers to smear and blur the edges. This is all very new.

Marsyas – very quick brushstrokes – reflects the violence of the subject.

Triumph of colour and light rather than accurate representation of an ideal form or perfect human figures. Paint applied thinly in places and thickly in others. Becomes not about accurate representation of reality but about expression of artist’s own thoughts, feelings and ideas. It would take over 300 years to give this a name – expressionism.

This new and direct way of painting gives it a sense of **drama and theatre.** Not necessarily about accuracy but about effect.

**Tintoretto.** Theatre, perspective, loose brush work. Quick painting. Energy and speed.

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**Baroque. Theatricality reaches its climax.**

**Caravaggio** – “inventor of Hollywood lighting”. Chiaroscuro. A mixture of realism – bare, dirty feet – for which he was criticised. And high emotion achieved through lighting techniques – big statements and dramatic lighting which does not occur in real life. C did not use drawings but worked directly on the canvas. And this becomes the norm now, drawing for experimentation and ideas and painting straight onto the surface with perhaps only simple drawing. **Gives immediacy and drama.** Artistic vividness. C is very popular now. Feels very emotional.
What we are seeing here are painterly effects. i.e. we are admiring not the skill of the painter to represent reality accurately but we are admiring the skill in handling paint and achieving effects with the paint. We are admiring the creation of a new world made out of paint. **Rembrandt Jewish Bride.** An example of Rembrandt’s constant experimenting with paint techniques. Brush, scratching away the paint with the handle of the brush and palette knife. Probably used fingers as well, like Titian.

Ultimately these are paintings about painting and about the skill of the painter and the creation of the painting.

Should we really say that in many cases, the subject matter of painting is painting.

When we look at these paintings, we are aware that we are seeing something two dimensional, static, created with paint. The painting is a new object in which we can see a likeness of the object being painted. We can see the object in the picture but we cannot see the picture as that object.

Representation has been defined as: not about seeing the painted subject on the canvas but as: seeing on the canvas, the painted subject as a particular object (or an object of a particular kind).

If we lose the sense of the object – i.e we focus on paint, Once the paint surface is recognisable, representation is inhibited (i.e. we cannot really say that the painting represents the object).

When we concentrate on the paint surface, the work then becomes akin to an abstract work.
Kenneth Clark on Las Meninas. Clark carried out an experiment walking back and forth – close to and then at a distance. As he got closer, the pictorial image (the painted representation) dissolved into fragments of paint.

“Suddenly what had been a hand, a ribbon and a piece of velvet dissolved into a fricassee of beautiful brushstrokes”.

Willem de Kooning. *Untitled VIII.*
Maurice Denis – “Remember that a picture before being a horse or a nude woman or an anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order”.

This might seem overly reductive but it gets to the heart of one of the important art questions of the 20th century which is the relationship between representational and abstract art.

If we see a painting as a flat surface covered with colours then we are breaking down how we look at traditional representational art.

And Mondrian can be seen as closely related to Vermeer. Mondrian is showing us how we can see the essential elements that underlie all pictures. Space, line, colour.

Modernist artists emphasising the flatness of the surface. They are giving up the illusion of creating three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface.

If you are going to be true to the two-dimensionality of the surface, you are not going to represent the external world of three dimensions. So you paint deliberately non-representational images.
In other words, art should have its own reality and not be an imitation of some other thing.

With abstract painting, in the words of Frank Stella, “What you see is what you see”. Or painting as “a flat surface with paint on”.
And so, can we really describe abstract art as abstract? What do we really mean by abstract? Is Stella’s "Marriage" abstract?

It is not an image of a “real” black rectangle with white straight lines in the sense that a tree in a Constable painting is an image of a real tree. This rectangle is to be seen simply as what it is in itself – not an image of anything other than itself. It is both an image of a black rectangle and a black rectangle at the same time. So is it abstract? No. It is the real thing.

And, paradoxically, traditional representative paintings are essentially abstractions of that model.

So what is the purpose of abstract art: I think that it is to make us think more deeply about all art and the idea of all types of painted images.

If we accept Maurice Denis’s argument, then representative art is a series of shapes and is no different from what we call abstract art which we describe as a series of shapes.

This is not to belittle traditional representative art but to make us think more seriously about art generally.

Representative art is a set of colours, shapes, forms, brushstrokes in the service of a deeper more complex idea. When we analyse the form of a work of representational art, we are in fact analysing it as an abstract work. Light on a Dutch still life or a Constable landscape. Geometry and structure in Raphael or Cezanne.
Colour and brushwork in Titian. 
Use and application of paint in Rembrandt.

**By stripping away the representational image, abstract art is forcing us to concentrate on the things that we should be looking at in traditional art. Line, shape, colour, structure, brushwork. i.e. all the things that make a work of art a work of art.**

And then by looking at these things – the two-dimensional object rather than the illusion of three-dimensional representations – the work of art can inspire deeper meanings free of the constraints of representation.

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**End by looking at Abstract Expressionism and particularly Colour Field Painting.**

**These paintings have no prior purpose. They require us simply to submit ourselves to them and the painting will act on us. A sort of meditation. Generate new types of experience.**

These deeper meanings are reflected in the fact that much of this work is underpinned by writings on philosophy and religion.

**Rothko, Newman**

use of colours and colour tones close in value and intensity, radically simplified compositions, no obvious point or focus of attention, very large formats, transcendental

**Barnett Newman**

Wrote an essay “The Sublime is Now”. Art to be stripped to its essentials but dealing with emotions. Sublime, imposition of monumental on the viewer.

Abstraction conveying awesome meaning and feeling which is carried through colour.

Newman’s use of narrow vertical line dividing two blocks of the same or closely related colour. He called these lines “zips”. i.e. take apart or bring together the whole.
**Onement 1.** The zip stands for the human figure. (c.f. some have seen them as the equivalent of Giacometti’s thin sculpture figures) Highly abstracted – a symbol of the human figure. The zip stands for the self and the relationship of the self with the wider world. The zip stands out. The self becomes the subject matter of the paintings. The relationship of the self to the wider cosmos, to the divine or the sublime. Influence of existentialism. Meanings of onement and number 1 and the line as the letter “I” the number 1 and the vertical form of the human figure.

Blurred edges of vertical lines give a sense of drama and ambiguity – colours bleeding into each other. i.e. not entirely geometric. But give a sense of life within the void of colour.

Vast fields of colour are also alive. These are not dead images. **Cathedra.** Shimmering blue like the sea but blue shading into green and purple and black. Religious elements – Newman. “Instead of making Cathedrals out of Christ, man or life, we are making them out of our own feelings”.

Newman wanted us to stand close to picture. The relationship is therefore to the colour. Intensity and sublimity of colour. We are drawn into it because there is so little going on in terms of representation or narrative. This can either give comfort or
a sense of alienation. Balance between awe and isolation in the face of what can feel boundless or eternal.

“Newman creates a world that is terrifying from all it implicitly contains. He places himself at the extreme frontier beyond which there is nothing”. Robert Rosenblum 1958.

For Newman art was a spiritual, meditative exercise. Art replacing or working alongside religion, spirituality.

**Mark Rothko**

Also painted large scale limited colour canvases which were deeply expressive of his ideas about the condition of mankind. His work is about the simplification of form and structure.

On the surface these are simple images. What is the idea or purpose behind these simple canvases.

‘The progression of a painter’s work...will be toward clarity; toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.’

“I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on — and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them”.

‘The progression of a painter’s work...will be toward clarity; toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.’

Mark Rothko
Rectangles against a background colour. He thought of his rectangular forms as actual objects positioned over the field of background colour. Floating in space. As a result of the shimmering and flickering light and the pulsating colours that project and recede, Rothko’s large canvases produce an impression of constant motion. The intense colour and bold form merge into a single unified image whose impact transcends the sum of its individual components.

Rothko’s paintings should fill a room on their own with no other paintings in it. Rothko Chapel.