

Outline for “Learning to Look at the National Gallery” Seminar

This six-week seminar will help you to navigate the mysteries of the art world, and develop your knowledge, appreciation and comfort level when viewing and discussing art. Each week we will gather together at the National Gallery of Canada to view artworks from the collection. There will be a different theme every week, including landscape art, portraiture, representations of history and historical figures, still-lives and symbolism, photography and abstract art. Lectures and discussions will take place in front of selected works in the Gallery’s collection.

Week 1: The Architecture of the National Gallery, and the Changing Nature of Landscape Art

We will talk about the architectural design of the National Gallery of Canada, and how it is set within its surroundings. We will then go into the galleries to look at how artists have depicted landscapes over the centuries, including how artists have faced the unique challenges of depicting the Canadian landscape.

Week 2: Who am I? A Closer Look at the Art of Portraiture

The way we present ourselves, or choose to be portrayed, is very revealing. In this week we will visit the European and Canadian galleries to view how artists have captured themselves and their subjects in sculpture, painting and photography, and what is revealed about the artists and the times in which they lived.

Week 3: Whose History is it Anyway?

Before the invention of photography and cinema, the depictions of historical events could only be understood through oral and visual representations, which were open to the interpretation of storytellers and artists. With a focus on Benjamin West’s 18th century history painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*, we will look at how a seminal moment in Canadian/European history was depicted and shaped through the artist’s choices. We will also look at some portraits of significant figures in history from the Gallery’s collection, who were witnesses to, and makers of our history.

Week 4: Hidden Meanings in Still Life, Mythological paintings, etc.

This week we will focus on some works in the National Gallery’s European galleries that use subtle and not-so-subtle symbols to send a message to the viewer. We will learn to decode images that may be obscure to us now, but were seen as deeply textured works in the eyes of our ancestors.

Week 5: Photographs – Capturing the Moment

With the advent of photography in the 19th century, it was no longer necessary for artists to create exact representations of subject matter. We will look at some examples of early photography in the Gallery’s collection, and also view the special exhibition *Hanran: 20th-Century Japanese Photography*.

Week 6: “My kid could do that!” The Perils of Abstraction

When the *Voice of Fire* was exhibited in the National Gallery of Canada after the building opened in 1988, a storm of controversy ensued. What is it about Abstract art that infuriates the public? How do we approach works of art that seem so simple, and not wonder whether the artist is ‘having us on’? We will look at a number of interesting and sometimes provocative abstract paintings and sculptures in the Gallery’s collection, from the early 20th century to the present day, to consider the artist’s message and its meaning for us.