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Programme of Study: Graphic Design

Module: ADDA4023 Ways of Perceiving

Task: Curate an Exhibition – 1,381

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The Portrayal of Emotion Through Time

This exhibition has been curated to exhibit how emotion in art has evolved over time, as well as explore the theory of emotionalism. From ancient Greek sculptures to soup cans, each piece provides a unique perspective regarding types of emotions and how they are portrayed. With modern having a more communicative, unrestricted, and rebellious nature, while its counterpart, classical art, reflecting realism, idealised beauty, and physically showing more intricacies, there are a wide range of ways that emotion and atmosphere can be represented, though all in which are inevitably subjective due to viewers' own perception and experiences. "What we see in art depends on what we bring to it". (Berger, J, 1972, p. 10).

This exhibition is showcasing in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, Rome, Italy. This is because it's quiet, contemplative, and reverent atmosphere in conjunction with the emotional and spiritual weight that the place already carries, will amplify the feelings of reflection and connection when viewers are examining the artworks which will help to enhance the overall viewing experience and make for a more accurate conclusive response to the exhibition.

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Figure 1, Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes. (c. 1st century CE),
Laocoön and His Sons, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy

Laocoön and His Sons originates from the Hellenistic period, depicting the Trojan priest, Laocoön, and his two sons being attacked by God-sent Sea serpents. This piece is recognised for its intense emotional power and dynamic composition, reflected in theories such as idealism and realism, making it a key example of art that portrays intense emotion - emotionalism. Regarding the emotions surrounding the piece, it is clear that the extreme struggle, despair, and anguish, as they aim to flee, can truly be presented in such a way that would elicit a powerful emotional response within the viewer. "The Laocoön group embodies the ultimate struggle, where every muscle strains against the serpents' coils, a spectacle of anguish frozen in marble". (Lessing, G.E.,

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1766, p. 17). The piece compels audiences to face the vulnerability of humanity against divine powers, delving into aspects such as human powerlessness, loss and sorrow, and instilling a sense of fear into viewers, reminding them of their own vulnerability. Furthermore, the pieces realistic and dramatic portrayal of movement in addition to its multi-perspective design, demonstrates how ancient Greek art both longed for and achieved strong emotional expression and engagement in a way that is hard to subjectify and can be seen undoubtedly.

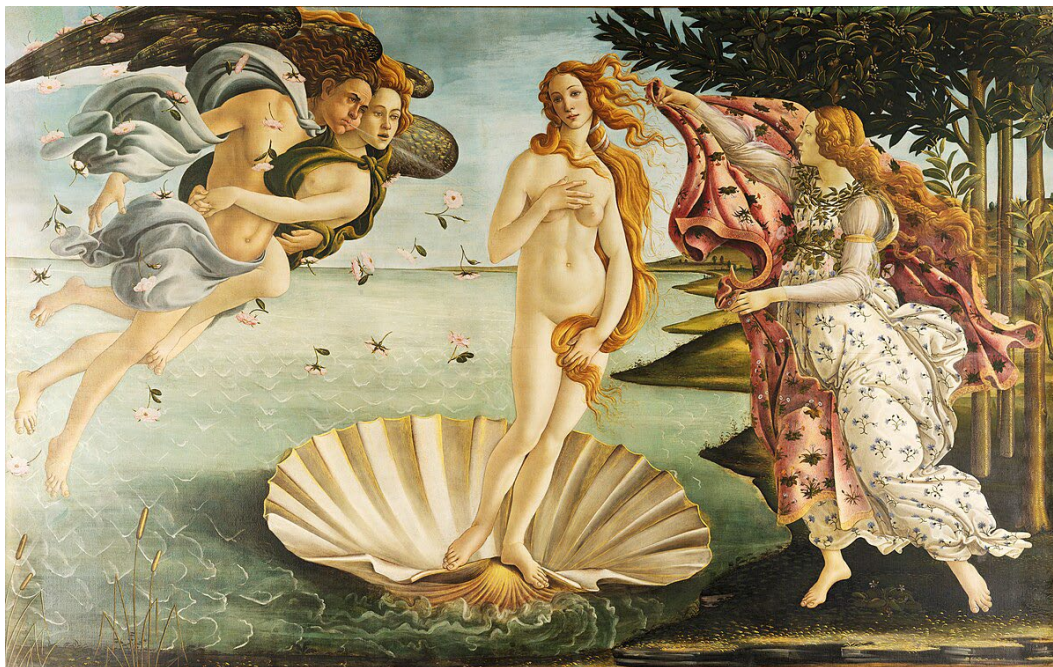


Figure 2, Botticelli, S. (c. 1485), *The Birth of Venus*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

Another piece with a similar motif is the early renaissance piece, *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. This piece depicts the mythological birth of the Roman goddess of love and beauty, Venus, emerging from the sea. In this piece aspects of ancient Greek and Roman art influences are evident, with the focus on idealism and realism, exhibiting the beauty and balance of the human body. This portrayal of the birth of the

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goddess Venus, inspires a dreamlike sense of serene elegance, honouring love and beauty and the relationship between humanity and the celestial. In addition, the celebratory tenor of the piece creates a sense of communal joy and fosters a unique shared emotional experience.

The painting itself utilises the central position of Venus as well as a balanced and symmetrical composition to enhance the delicate, flowing strokes and light tones that embody the paintings idealized quality of proportion and elegance. This also heightens sense of tranquillity, and ethereal presence within Venus that juxtaposes the more dynamic surrounding figures creating a more outstanding viewing experience that will strengthen viewers sentiments towards the piece. "Botticelli's Birth of Venus radiates a delicate melancholy and serene grace, as if the goddess herself embodies a yearning for an unattainable ideal of beauty. The painting's soft contours and flowing rhythms evoke a sense of tender reverence and wistful longing, inviting the viewer into a dreamlike realm where divine and human emotions intertwine." (Deimling, B., 2007, p. 52). These striking qualities also seemingly defy subjectivity similarly to *Laocoön and His Sons* and are straightforward in their way of evoking emotion and connecting to the viewer.

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Figure 3, Picasso, P. (1937), *Guernica*, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain

Juxtaposing the previous two art pieces is *Guernica* by artist Pablo Picasso, an anti-war piece depicting the bombing of Guernica, a small Basque town, during the Spanish Civil War. This more modern piece stimulates profound feelings of darkness and despair through modernist movements and techniques such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism, in addition to the piece's monochrome palette. The homogenous palette used in *Guernica* creates an emotionally intense and funeral-like atmosphere that mirrors mediterranean traditions of lamentation, further enhancing the grief and horror of the event and its portrayal within the painting. Cubist deformation in *Guernica* creates an overwhelming atmosphere of instability and disorientation which contributes to the sense of fear and ambiguity within the piece. The figures seen in the piece also make use of this deformation in a more physical sense with them being portrayed as broken, and contorted, relaying this atmosphere of fear, and exhibiting to the audience multiple perspectives of the tragedy, within the imagery. "Guernica is not a painting you look at, but an assault you feel - the chaos of war screaming through jagged

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forms and muted tones". (Chipp, H.B., 1988, p.171). Key symbols within the piece also help to guide viewers through the narrative with indicators such as a grieving mother carrying a dead child, a gored horse symbolizing the Spanish republic, screaming figures, and newsprint textures symbolizing the media's involvement, and a flower symbolizing hope.

To compare, both *Guernica* and *Laocoön and His Sons* use these contorted forms to amplify emotional impact, with both pieces seeking empathy for their victims, though overall, *Guernica* expresses emotion in a way that can be seen as less outstanding, requiring the viewer to analyse and look further into the piece to truly comprehend the story and emotions behind it unlike both *Laocoön and His Sons* and *The Birth of Venus*.



Figure 4, Warhol, A. (1962), *Campbell's Soup Cans*, New York, America

The painting *Campbell's Soup Cans* is a Pop Art piece by Andy Warhol that contrasts all previously mentioned pieces having been created in the postmodernist period and

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seemingly lacking emotion entirely. In this piece Andy Warhol illustrates aversion with topics such as commercialism, mass production, and consumerism amid the rise of Pop Art, a genre in which embraces consumer culture and challenges the emotional intensity of expressionism - seen in *Guernica*. Within this piece Warhol questions the inherent value and meaning of art in a post-Cold War world where everything is privatised and predetermined, showcasing objects familiar to viewers compelling them to reevaluate their relationship with consumer goods. The soup cans represent everyday life, being consumed by both the rich and poor and nullifying class distinctions. "The Soup Cans are a cold, mechanical repetition - art stripped of emotion, mirroring the consumer age". (Danto, A.C., 1992, p. 87).

Purposely free of overt emotional expression, *Campbell's Soup Cans* aligns with Warhol's "be a machine" objective and rejects the intensity of Abstract Expressionism, unlike the visceral anguish felt in *Guernica* or the compelling pathos of *Laocoön and His Sons*. An enigmatic and emotionally distant image is something Warhol cultivated himself, with his works often reflecting this - lacking personal sentiment. Though this could be seen in negative light, this lack of emotion actually heightened the impact of his pieces and allowed his works to influence viewers during that period, and even today.

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Figure 5, Weiwei, A. (2017), *Law of the Journey*, National Gallery, Prague

Ai Weiwei's *Law of the Journey* is a postmodernist art installation of a rubber boat filled with over 300 faceless figures that addresses the global refugee crisis, portraying the perilous journey embarked on by refugees. This piece is suspended in mid-air evoking a sense of limbo and uncertainty, much like the feelings of the people on the boat escaping violence and seeking shelter. feelings of desperation, mourning, and vulnerability are also evoked through the overcrowded raft and fallen figures, portraying the experiences of the refugees and their hopelessness amidst the oceanic abyss, putting everything at risk for a chance at safety. The figures' facelessness conveys a sense of anonymity and implies how these individuals are reduced to mere numbers - eventually disregarded and overlooked by society. With Ai Weiwei himself being a refugee (fuelling the emotional connection behind his works) and now an activist, he uses his work to raise awareness for the urgent need for compassion and action in the

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face of crises such as these. The pieces imagery resonates in ongoing debates about migration, challenging countries policies and ensuring its impact is felt beyond 2015 to current conflicts

unlike previously mentioned pieces, this piece confronts viewers directly with visceral empathy and political outrage. Like *Guernica* its addresses specific crises though in contrast universalises it. It rejects detachment unlike *Campbell's Soup Cans* and juxtaposes the idealism of *The Birth of Venus* with unvarnished suffering. In terms of the way it portrays emotion however, it is comparable to the older pieces in that it is clear in what it is conveying at face value, unlike *Guernica*.

Through the exhibiting of these pieces the desired outcome is for viewers to reflect, relate, and to experience the emotion behind each art piece. Winterson writes,

“What art does is to coax us away from the mechanical and towards the miraculous. The emotions it arouses are not just a response to the work but to our own buried longings.” (Winterson, J. 1995, p. 15)

The deeper meaning and main contention behind this exhibition is whether modern or classical art better portrays emotion. Though the response is inevitably subjective, this exhibition aims to provide a definitive answer through examining viewers perceptions of each piece and their emotional perspectives and responses.

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