

Understanding and Analysing Images

Images preceded writing and therefore using pictures to send visual messages came before written or verbal ones, as cave paintings like the one in the picture reveal.

Since those first images, humans have come to rely on lots of different kinds of visual messages in their daily lives. From traffic lights, road signs, to charts and graphs, to emojis and more, images form an important part of human worlds.



Lascaux cave painting, France

Meanings

All visuals convey messages and therefore have meanings – and this includes art works. When art is analysed, hidden or abstract meanings are being searched for. To get at to those meanings, one first needs to think about 4 key aspects of the image, namely:

- **The content** – what the picture depicts
- **The visuals** – what colours and composition are used and if there is text on the picture
- **The source** – where it came from, who made it, when and why
- **Technical details** – quality, media (oil, acrylic, photo, digital etc), light

After finding out the answers to the above, one then needs to think about what the artist wanted you to see – in other words, the perspective from which you can look at the image. This is called ‘the gaze’. An artist composes their pictures from a position and the individuals in the image look out of it according to how the artist paints them. The gaze, therefore, is usually about the viewer and how the artist wants a person to be seen. However, in the picture *Las Meninas* or *The Maids of Honour* painted by Velasquez in 1656 the gaze is all over the place (see next page). With the artist painted into the painting, and with the use of the mirror and doorway in the background, it is unclear who is looking at who and where the view the painting is expressing is being seen from. Have a look at the image to see how Velasquez has played around with the issue of looking at images. For our purposes, it is sufficient to know that when paintings are created the artist is careful about what and how you will see their subject.



Las Meninas or *The Maids of Honour* painted by Velasquez in 1656, Wiki Commons.

Sculptures are 3-dimensional art works, and they use gaze differently. However, similar rules to image analysis apply also to sculptures.



Miyasaka Hakuryu II - Tigress with Two Cubs - Walters 71909.jpg
Public Domain

Step by Step Analysis Method of a Page of a Graphic Novel



FEBRUARY 27, 1960 WAS MY FIRST ARREST,



The page above is taken from *March* – graphic novel covering the US civil rights movement. This is just one page from the book. The novel is written by Congressman [John Lewis](#) and [Andrew Aydin](#) and was illustrated by [Nate Powell](#).

Step 1: (First impression)

This step provides an overview or first impression of the image. This is where the picture is *described*. Ask yourself: What do you see? Take a good look at the pictures and what is written. What do the images and text show you? How does the text add to the images? How do you feel when you look at it?

The page shows people getting arrested for demonstrating together in America. It shows the date of the event. It provides the reader with the perspective of a person being arrested and shows how black people in America were treated at that time and during that event.

Step 2. (Techniques)

This step focuses on the methods used by the artist. Ask yourself: What has the artist done to create this image? What techniques has the artist employed? How have the images on the page been structured? What is in the foreground; what is in the background?

The artist has drawn the picture in 2 halves using dramatic contrast between light and dark. The top half of the picture is lighter than the bottom section. Spikes separate both sections and the light on the faces below makes them shadowy. The close-up face makes it dramatically present and even menacing. We know to sing 'we shall overcome' because of the way the writing curves and the musical notes accompanying the waving banners.

Step 3. (Deep analysis)

This step links the technique or method to topic and the purpose.

Using light and dark in such stark contrast signals the social differences between the police and the protestors being arrested. It also represents the suffering and the poor social treatment of the protestors' lives. However, even in the darkness the fierce face shows determination to make changes. This message is added to by the lyrics of the song flowing throughout the image.

Step 4. Putting it all together (synthesis)

The picture shows a society struggling with racism and sends a message about how living in a racist society feels to those oppressed by the system.

If you are interested to know more about comic analysis and *March* look at this [blog](#) post. This method can be used for any image. Try it with the one below.



The 3rd of May in 1808 in Madrid by Goya (Wiki Commons).

After you have described the image and thought about the techniques Goya used, now look up the date in history and try and analyse what message the artist was trying to convey about the time and event. How successful do you think he was?

Now look at the image analysis video posted on Moodle about this painting to see whether your analysis chimed with that of the experts.

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