

Subject Matter

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

When an artist chooses something or someone to depict in their artwork, they are essentially choosing the subject matter for that work of art. In this lesson, you will learn about:



BIG IDEA

The subject matter of a work of art is the content the artist is choosing to depict.

1. Portrait vs. Self-Portrait

A **portrait** is a work of art that *portrays* a person. When an artist depicts another person in a piece of art, it is simply called a portrait. But when the artist puts him- or herself on the canvas, it is a **self-portrait**. It is important to understand the difference. A portrait is painted by someone else.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is a portrait of Edward VII of England. This is his coronation painting from 1902.



Portrait of King Edward VII by Luke Fildes

When an artist paints a picture of him- or herself, this is called a self-portrait. Essentially, the artist is the **subject matter** in his or her own work of art.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a self-portrait of the artist Mary Beale from the late 17th century.



Self Portrait by Mary Beale



TERMS TO KNOW

Portrait

An image of an individual

Self-Portrait

An artist's portrait of him- or herself

Subject Matter

The content of a work of art; what the artist chooses to depict

2. Still Life vs. Landscape

It is also important to differentiate between a painting that is still life and one that is landscape. **A still life** is a painting of arranged, inanimate, or still objects.

➔ **EXAMPLE** This 1901 still life painting of dishes and fruit is by the French artist Henri Matisse.



Dishes and Fruit by Henri Matisse

In contrast, a **landscape** is a painting of the countryside.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a landscape from 1894 by the Russian painter Isaac Levitan.



Above the Eternal Peace by Isaac Levitan



TERMS TO KNOW

Still Life

A work of art that depicts artfully arranged inanimate objects

Landscape

A work of art that takes the countryside as subject matter

3. Narrative

A **narrative** is a work of art that depicts a story. Common themes include stories from the Bible, some other Christian stories, classical myths from ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and regional folklore.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this mid-16th century artwork depicting the fall of the rebel angels from heaven. This is a Christian story, and it's by the artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder.



The Fall of the Rebel Angels by Pieter Bruegel the Elder



TERM TO KNOW

Narrative

The visual depiction of a story in works of art



SUMMARY

Artists choose subject matter in order to depict something specific in their artwork. In this lesson, you learned about **portrait vs. self-portrait**. A portrait is an image of someone else, whereas in a self-portrait, the artist is the subject matter and he or she paints him- or herself. You also learned about **still life vs. landscape**. Remember, a still life is when the subject matter is arranged and inanimate, or still. On the other hand, a landscape uses the countryside as its subject matter. Lastly, a **narrative** is a work of art that uses a story as the subject matter.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Landscape

A work of art that takes the countryside as subject matter.

Narrative

The visual depiction of a story in works of art.

Portrait

An image of an individual person.

Self-Portrait

An artist's portrait of herself.

Still Life

A work of art that depicts artfully arranged inanimate objects.

Subject Matter

The content of a work of art, what the artist chooses to depict.