

# Academic English <sup>UK</sup>



## Describing Paintings

How to describe works of art using a range of English phrases

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## Teacher's Notes

**Aim:** To give students practice describing paintings using phrases for general description, style and technique, colours and mood, and interpretation.

**Time:** 60–90 minutes

### Introduction

- In pairs/groups, students briefly discuss a famous painting they like.

### Task 1: Artistic Styles

- Read about different artistic styles and take notes.

### Task 2: Definition Matching

- Match definitions with styles.
- Feedback: share/distribute **ANSWERS**.

### Task 3: Language Phrases

- Read through language phrases, check unknown words.

### Task 4: Describing Paintings

- Study five paintings and use phrases to describe them.
- Feedback: share/distribute **ANSWERS (includes expert analysis of the paintings)**.

### Differentiation

- Students work on one painting at a time with **ANSWERS** given after.
- Or each student studies one of the five paintings, then shares their description in groups.
- Or in groups study one painting and share findings with another group.

### Task 5: Describe a Famous Painting

- Students select a famous painting of their choice and describe it using the phrases.

## Describing Paintings

### Introduction: A Famous Painting

Think of a famous painting that you like. Describe and explain the painting to another student in terms of a general description, its style, use of colours and your interpretation of meaning.

**Make some notes here first:**

### Task 1: Different Painting Styles

What do you know about these different styles? Add some notes to the description column.

	Style	Description
1	Renaissance	
2	Baroque	
3	Rococo	
4	Neoclassicism	
5	Romanticism	
6	Realism	
7	Impressionism	
8	Post-Impressionism	
9	Expressionism	
10	Cubism	
11	Surrealism	
12	Abstract Art	
13	Pop Art	
14	Minimalism	

## Task 2: Different Styles in Painting: Definition Matching

Match the different styles to their correction definitions. The first one has been done for you.

	Style		Description
1	Renaissance	A	<i>Light, decorative, and playful, often using pastel colours and elegant details.</i>
2	Baroque	B	<i>Built on Impressionism but added bold colours, shapes and emotional depth.</i>
3	Rococo	C	<i>Explored dreams and the subconscious through strange, imaginative images.</i>
4	Neoclassicism	D	<i>Reduced painting to simple forms, lines, and colours for clarity and purity.</i>
5	Romanticism	E	<del><i>Focused on realism, perspective, and harmony to reflect human beauty and proportion.</i></del>
6	Realism	F	<i>Highlighted emotion, imagination, and nature's power over reason.</i>
7	Impressionism	G	<i>Focused on shapes, colours, and lines rather than realistic subjects.</i>
8	Post-Impressionism	H	<i>Used distorted forms and strong colours to express inner feelings.</i>
9	Expressionism	I	<i>Dramatic, emotional, and full of movement with strong contrasts of light and shadow.</i>
10	Cubism	J	<i>Inspired by ancient Greece and Rome, emphasizing order, simplicity, and moral themes.</i>
11	Surrealism	K	<i>Aimed to depict everyday life and people with truthful accuracy.</i>
12	Abstract Art	L	<i>Used bright colours and imagery from popular culture and advertising.</i>
13	Pop Art	M	<i>Broke objects into geometric shapes to show multiple perspectives at once.</i>
14	Minimalism	N	<i>Captured fleeting moments with quick brushstrokes and vibrant light effects.</i>

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### Task 3: Language Phrases for Describing Artwork

When describing art, we usually focus on four areas: general description, style and technique, colours and mood, and personal interpretation. Below are useful English phrases for each section.

#### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

#### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the [Renaissance / Impressionist / Cubist / etc...] style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)... and is called...*

*The artist uses bright / muted / contrasting / earthy / colours.*

*The brushstrokes are bold / delicate / expressive / loose / full of movement / precise...*

*The composition is balanced / symmetrical / fragmented with...*

*It is painted in oil / watercolour / fresco / acrylic on canvas.*

#### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a dramatic / calm / mysterious / striking / unsettling / stark / effect.*

*The colours give the painting a warm / cold / vibrant / monumental / formal / serious atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is joyful / melancholic / unsettling / reflective / tense / austere / serene.*

#### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

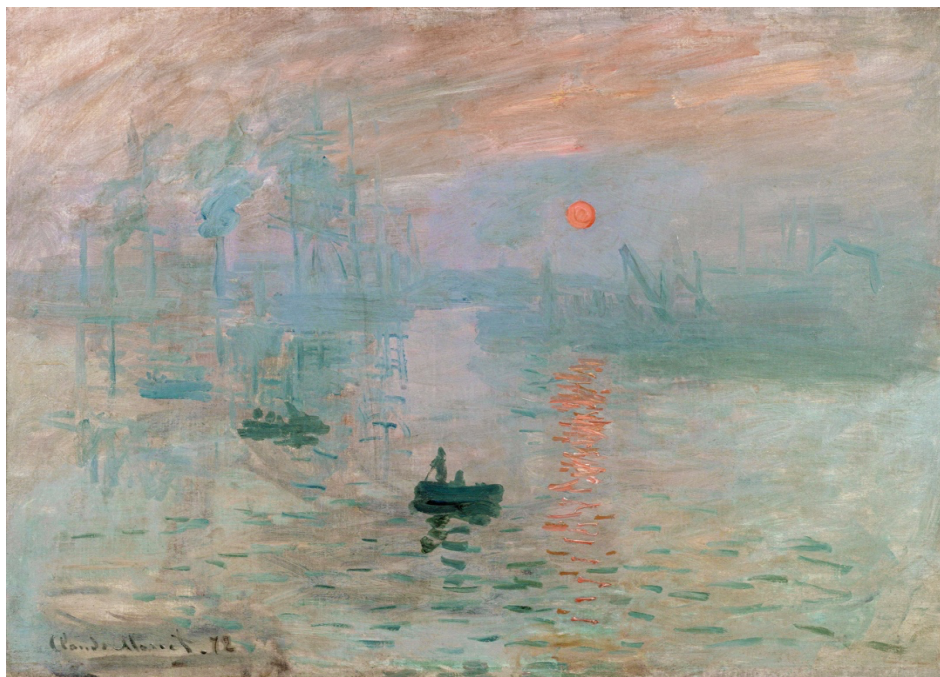
*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*

## Task 4: Describing Paintings

Study the five paintings and complete the phrases from the box to form your description.

### Painting 1



#### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

#### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

#### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

#### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

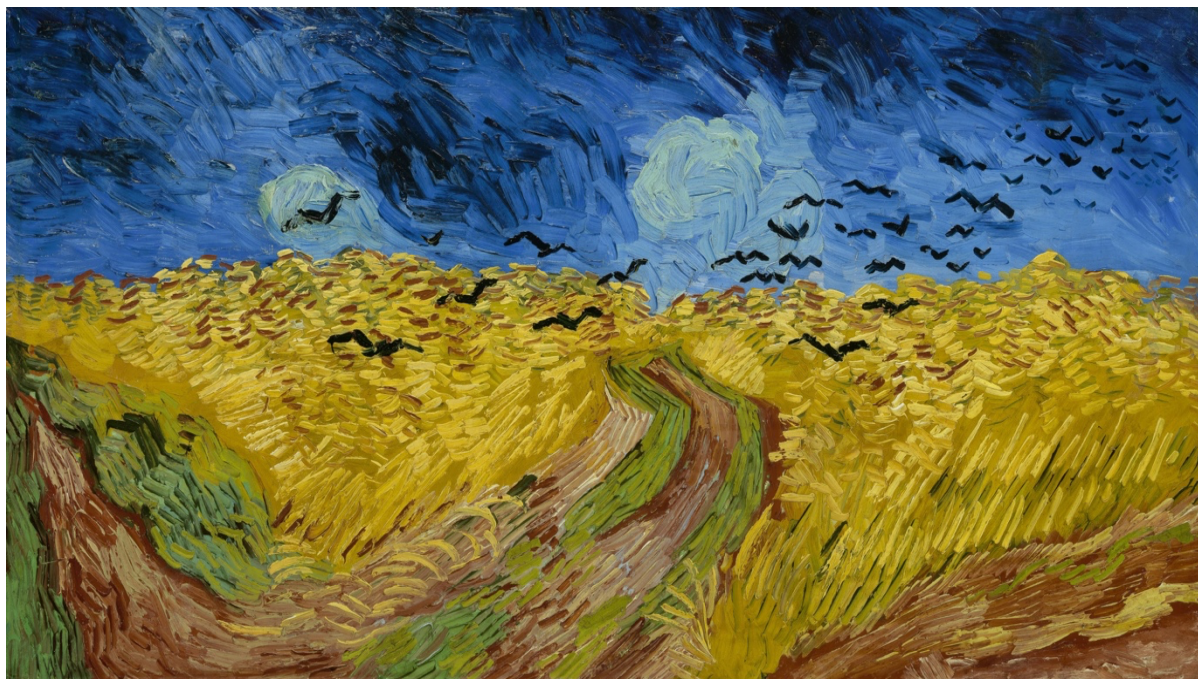
*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*

## Painting 2



### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

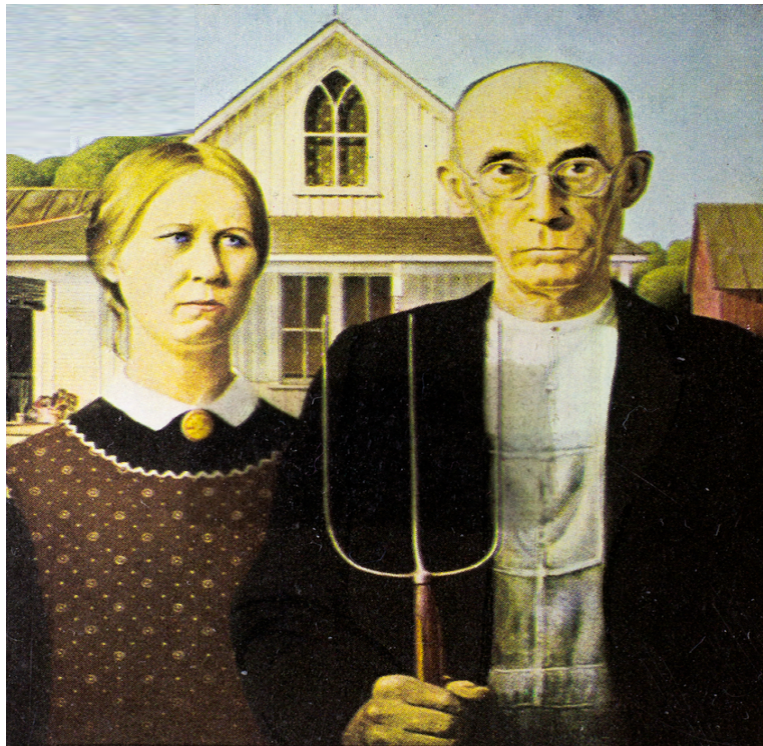
*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*



## Painting 3



### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*

## Painting 4



### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*



## Painting 5



### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*



### Task 5: Describe a Famous Painting

Select a famous painting of your choice and describe it using the phrases.

#### 1. General Description

*This painting shows / depicts / portrays...*

*The artwork represents...*

*It is a portrait of... / It is a landscape of...*

*The scene is set in...*

*It appears to be...*

#### 2. Talking about Style & Technique

*It was painted in the ..... style.*

*I think it was painted by (artist's name)...and is called...*

*The artist uses ... colours of...*

*The brushstrokes are....*

*The composition is ... with...*

*It is painted in....*

#### 3. Colours & Mood

*The dominant colours are...*

*The use of light creates a .... effect.*

*The colours give the painting a ... atmosphere.*

*The mood of the painting is ...*

#### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

*The painting might symbolise...*

*It could reflect the artist's feelings about...*

*It makes me feel...*

*I like this work because...*

*This reminds me of...*

## ANSWERS

	Style		Description
1	Renaissance	E	<i>Focused on realism, perspective, and harmony to reflect human beauty and proportion.</i>
2	Baroque	I	<i>Dramatic, emotional, and full of movement with strong contrasts of light and shadow.</i>
3	Rococo	A	<i>Light, decorative, and playful, often using pastel colours and elegant details.</i>
4	Neoclassicism	J	<i>Inspired by ancient Greece and Rome, emphasising order, simplicity, and moral themes.</i>
5	Romanticism	F	<i>Highlighted emotion, imagination, and nature's power over reason.</i>
6	Realism	K	<i>Aimed to depict everyday life and people with truthful accuracy.</i>
7	Impressionism	N	<i>Captured fleeting moments with quick brushstrokes and vibrant light effects.</i>
8	Post-Impressionism	B	<i>Built on Impressionism but added bold colours, shapes, and emotional depth.</i>
9	Expressionism	H	<i>Used distorted forms and strong colours to express inner feelings.</i>
10	Cubism	M	<i>Broke objects into geometric shapes to show multiple perspectives at once.</i>
11	Surrealism	C	<i>Explored dreams and the subconscious through strange, imaginative images.</i>
12	Abstract Art	G	<i>Focused on shapes, colours, and lines rather than realistic subjects.</i>
13	Pop Art	L	<i>Used bright colours and imagery from popular culture and advertising.</i>
14	Minimalism	D	<i>Reduced painting to simple forms, lines, and colours for clarity and purity.</i>

1	E	2	I	3	A	4	J	5	F	6	K	7	N	8	B	9	H	10	M	11	C	12	G	13	L	14	D
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## Painting 1: Impression, Sunrise (1872) by Claude Monet **SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

### 1. General Description

- This painting shows *the port of Le Havre at sunrise*.
- The artwork represents *a harbour scene with boats on the water*.
- It is a landscape of *the sea with mist and morning light*.
- The scene is set in *northern France in the early morning*.
- It appears to be *both realistic and atmospheric*.

### 2. Style & Technique

- It was painted in *the Impressionist style*.
- I think it was painted by *Claude Monet* and is called '*Impression, Sunrise*'.
- The artist uses *muted but contrasting colours of blue and orange*.
- The brushstrokes *are loose and expressive*.
- The composition is *balanced with the sun as a focal point*.
- It is painted in *oil on canvas*.

### 3. Colours & Mood

- The dominant colours are *blue, grey, and orange*.
- The use of light creates *a calm yet striking effect*.
- The colours give the painting *a cool atmosphere with touches of warmth*.
- The mood of the painting is *reflective and tranquil*.

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

- The painting might symbolise *the beginning of a new day or era*.
- It could reflect the artist's feelings *about change and modernity*.
- It makes me feel *peaceful and thoughtful*.
- I like this work because it captures *a fleeting moment with energy*.
- This reminds me of *early mornings by the sea*.

## Expert Analysis

### Subject & Context

*Impression, Sunrise* shows the port of Le Havre at dawn, Monet's hometown. Instead of detail, it captures atmosphere and change, reflecting modern industrial France.

### Technique & Style

Monet used loose brushstrokes, thin paint, and striking colour contrast. The orange sun glows against hazy blues, breaking with academic tradition. Its title gave "Impressionism" its name.

### Psychological Effect

The misty scene feels calm yet alive. Blurred outlines let viewers imagine the details, creating immediacy and showing perception rather than reality.

### Reception & Legacy

First mocked as unfinished, it is now seen as a turning point in art. Critics recognise it as the manifesto of Impressionism and a foundation of modern art.

### General Overview

Experts agree that *Impression, Sunrise* is less about the port itself and more about capturing an instant of light and atmosphere. It represents a turning point in art history, where the focus shifted to subjective perception and modern life. Its revolutionary technique, psychological immediacy, and cultural impact make it one of the defining works of 19th-century painting.

## Painting 2: Wheatfield with Crows (1890) by Vincent van Gogh **SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

### 1. General Description

- This painting depicts *a vast wheat field under a stormy sky*.
- The artwork represents *a dramatic landscape with dark crows flying overhead*.
- It is a landscape of *nature, fields, and a turbulent sky*.
- The scene is set in *the countryside, stretching into the distance*.
- It appears to be *both beautiful and ominous at the same time*.

### 2. Style & Technique

- It was painted in *Post-Impressionist style*.
- I think it was painted by *Vincent van Gogh* and is called '*Wheatfield with Crows*'.
- The artist uses contrasting colours of *yellow wheat and a dark blue sky*.
- The brushstrokes are *bold and expressive, full of movement*.
- The composition is fragmented with winding paths and scattered crows.
- It is painted in *oil on canvas*.

### 3. Colours & Mood

- The dominant colours are *golden yellow, deep blue, and black*.
- The use of light creates *a dramatic and unsettling effect*.
- The colours give the painting *a vibrant yet threatening atmosphere*.
- The mood of the painting is *melancholic and tense*.

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

- The painting might symbolise *struggle and mortality*.
- It could reflect the artist's feelings about *isolation and despair*.
- It makes me feel *uneasy but also deeply moved*.
- I like this work because it is *powerful and emotional*.
- This reminds me of *the fragility of life and the beauty of nature*.

## Expert Analysis

### Subject & Context

*It shows a turbulent landscape of golden wheat under a stormy sky, with dark crows flying overhead. Van Gogh painted it in the final weeks of his life, and many link it to his declining mental health.*

### Technique & Style

*The work is painted in oil on canvas with bold, expressive brushstrokes and strong contrasts of yellow and blue. The fragmented composition, with winding paths and scattered birds, heightens the sense of unease.*

### Psychological Effect

*Experts note that the dramatic colours and restless movement create a feeling of tension, melancholy, and foreboding. The crows are often seen as symbols of death or fate, intensifying the painting's emotional power.*

### Reception & Legacy

*Art historians regard it as one of Van Gogh's greatest masterpieces, admired for its raw intensity and symbolic depth. It is often interpreted as a visual testament to his inner struggles and stands as a haunting legacy of his final artistic period.*

### General Overview

*In essence, "Wheatfield with Crows" is seen as one of Van Gogh's most powerful final works, combining bold colour and expressive brushstrokes to capture both beauty and turmoil. Overall, experts interpret it as a haunting yet brilliant masterpiece that reflects his inner struggles and enduring artistic genius.*

### Painting 3: American Gothic (1930) by Grant Wood **SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

#### 1. General Description

- This painting shows *a stern farmer and a woman standing in front of a wooden house.*
- The artwork *represents rural American life during the Great Depression.*
- It is a portrait of *two figures who seem to be father and daughter.*
- The scene is set in *a small Midwestern town.*
- It appears to be *a quiet, serious moment in everyday life.*

#### 2. Style & Technique

- It was painted *in the Regionalist style.*
- I think it was painted by *Grant Wood* and is called '*American Gothic*'.
- The artist uses *muted and earthy colours of brown, grey, and green.*
- The brushstrokes are *delicate and precise.*
- The composition is *symmetrical with the two figures framed by the house.*
- It is painted in *oil on beaverboard.*

#### 3. Colours & Mood

- The dominant colours are *earthy browns, greys, and dull greens.*
- The use of light creates *a calm yet stark effect.*
- The colours give *the painting a cold, serious atmosphere.*
- The mood of the painting is *unsettling and austere.*

#### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

- The painting might symbolise *traditional American values of hard work and simplicity.*
- It could reflect the artist's feelings *about rural identity and national character.*
- It makes me feel *curious about the story of the two figures.*
- I like this work because *it is both realistic and mysterious.*
- This reminds me of *old photographs of farming families.*

### Expert Analysis

#### Subject & Context

*American Gothic is seen as both a celebration and critique of rural life during the Great Depression. It reflects values of hard work and endurance, while its rigid portrayal also suggests satire of small-town America.*

#### Technique & Style

*Classified as Regionalism, the painting uses oil on beaverboard with precise, clear brushstrokes. Its symmetrical composition and sharp detail combine realism with subtle stylisation.*

#### Psychological Effect

*The stern faces, pitchfork, and rigid posture create tension and austerity. Critics debate whether it parodies rural severity or honours resilience, leaving viewers uncertain.*

#### Reception & Legacy

*First shown in 1930, it divided opinion; some felt mocked, others proud. It later became a cultural icon, endlessly reproduced and parodied, and now stands as one of America's most recognisable artworks.*

#### General Overview

*Experts generally agree that American Gothic is a multilayered work; part social commentary, part national symbol. Its ambiguity (satire or sincerity?) is what keeps it powerful. The painting's clarity, formal composition, and cultural resonance have ensured its lasting fame as one of the most recognisable images of the 20th century.*

**Painting 4: A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1886) by Georges Seurat****SUGGESTED ANSWERS****1. General Description**

- This painting shows *people relaxing by the River Seine in Paris*.
- The artwork represents *leisure in modern urban life*.
- It is a landscape of *a park filled with figures and trees*.
- The scene is set on *a sunny afternoon*.
- It appears to be a *peaceful yet carefully arranged moment*.

**2. Style & Technique**

- It was painted in *the Post-Impressionist style*.
- I think it was painted *by Georges Seurat* and is called *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.
- The artist uses *bright and contrasting colours of green, blue, red, and white*.
- The brushstrokes are *delicate and precise, created with tiny dots (pointillism)*.
- The composition is *balanced and symmetrical with figures evenly spaced*.
- It is painted in *oil on canvas*.

**3. Colours & Mood**

- The dominant colours are *green and blue*.
- The use of light creates *a calm and steady effect*.
- The colours give *the painting a vibrant yet formal atmosphere*.
- The mood of the painting is *serene but slightly distant*.

**4. Interpretation & Personal Response**

- The painting might symbolise *the new social life of the Parisian middle class*.
- It could reflect the artist's interest in *science, order, and harmony*.
- It makes me feel *calm but also curious about the figures' lives*.
- I like this work because *of its unique pointillist technique*.
- This reminds me of *quiet afternoons in a public park*.

**Expert Analysis****Subject & Context**

The painting shows Parisians relaxing by the River Seine. Experts view it as a reflection of late nineteenth-century urban society, highlighting both leisure and social formality.

**Technique & Style**

Seurat used pointillism, applying tiny dots of pure colour. The work blends Impressionist themes with a scientific approach to optics. Its symmetry contrasts with the casual subject, adding order.

**Psychological Effect**

Although the park appears peaceful, the figures seem stiff and motionless. This mix of calm and detachment reflects harmony but also isolation in modern city life.

**Reception & Legacy**

When first shown in 1886, it divided critics. Some admired its science, while others found it mechanical. Today it is seen as Seurat's masterpiece and a milestone of modern art.

**General Overview**

Experts agree that the painting is not merely a scene of leisure but a complex exploration of modernity, science, and social order. Its subject, technique, and legacy make it one of the defining works of Post-Impressionism and a cornerstone of art history.



## Painting 5: The Tower of Babel (1563) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder **SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

### 1. General Description

- This painting depicts *the biblical Tower of Babel rising above a busy city.*
- The artwork represents *human ambition and the attempt to reach heaven.*
- It is a landscape of *workers, ships, and buildings surrounding the giant tower.*
- The scene is set in the *Middle East.*
- It appears to be *both a construction site and a symbol of pride.*

### 2. Style & Technique

- It was painted in the *Renaissance style.*
- I think it was painted by *Pieter Bruegel the Elder* and is called '*The Tower of Babel*'.
- The artist uses *muted and earthy colours of stone, sky, and greenery.*
- The brushstrokes are *delicate, creating fine architectural detail.*
- The composition is *balanced with the tower dominating the centre.*
- It is painted in *oil on a panel.*

### 3. Colours & Mood

- The dominant colours are *brown, grey, blue, and green.*
- The use of light creates *a dramatic effect with clouds and shadows.*
- The colours *give the painting a cold, monumental atmosphere.*
- The mood of the painting is *unsettling, showing both activity and destruction.*

### 4. Interpretation & Personal Response

- The painting might symbolise *human pride and divine punishment.*
- It could reflect the artist's feelings *about power and empire.*
- It makes me feel *small in comparison to the huge tower.*
- I like this work because *of its detail and moral message.*
- This reminds me of *stories about overconfidence and failure.*

## Expert Analysis

### Subject & Context

Bruegel reimagined Babel in a Northern European setting, reflecting 16th-century Antwerp, a hub of trade and construction. The biblical tale of humanity's attempt to reach heaven is presented as a warning against arrogance and overreaching ambition.

### Technique & Style

Bruegel's meticulous detail, typical of the Northern Renaissance, is clear in the tower's sharp architectural forms and tiny figures. Oil on panel allowed precision, while Roman-like arches show both strength and fragility. The central tower and surrounding harbour balance order with collapse.

### Psychological Effect

The painting inspires awe but also unease. The tower's scale overwhelms, while dark clouds and tilting angles suggest futility. Viewers sense the workers' struggle and the inevitability of failure.

### Reception & Legacy

Admired in its time, the painting became an emblem of human pride and failure. Today it symbolises miscommunication and cultural division, with experts linking it to themes of globalisation, hubris, and fragile empires.

### General Overview

Art historians regard *The Tower of Babel* as one of Bruegel's most ambitious works, combining biblical narrative with social and political commentary. The vast structure dominates the scene, while the detailed workers and landscape ground the story in everyday life.