



Light & tone

Light is a crucial element for artists to consider in their work. Some manipulate it for dramatic effect. To explore the wide variety of ways that different artists have used light, look at a range of paintings and answer these questions.

Tone

- Describe the tonal range (brightness levels) of the work. Is there a full tonal range, or is the work predominantly light or dark? What effect does this have on the painting? What would the effect be if more or less light were introduced?

Contrast

- Are there clear areas of contrast? What effect does this have?

Light source

- Is the source of light in the work obvious? If so, what direction is it coming from? To find out, imagine you are holding a torch as the light source for the painting. Where would you need to point the torch?

Consistency

- Is the light source consistent (going in the same direction and having the same intensity throughout the entire painting)? If there are inconsistencies, where are they?

Quality

- How would you describe the quality of the light? Is it hard or soft? Look at the edges of objects and their shadows. Is the light dramatic, mysterious, peaceful, gentle, atmospheric, diffuse, dull, sharp?

Shadow

- Can you see any shadows? If so, in which direction are they falling? Are the shadows long or short? What colour are they? Do the shadows have symbolic meaning? Can you see any chiaroscuro (light emerging from areas of darkness)?

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Colour

- Is the light in the painting coloured or white?
Look at the objects in the painting and describe how light affects their colours.

Setting

- Is the light natural or artificial? Does it suggest a certain setting – a place, time of day, or season? Eg, is the light warm or cool, and is the source of the light high or low?

Composition

- Is light being used to lead your eye to particular areas of the painting? If so, which ones? What effect does this have on the way you interpret the work?

Form

- Is light being used to create or define 3-D forms in the painting? Imagine what effect altering the light's intensity or direction might have on the forms.

Symbolism

- How does the use of light contribute to the meaning or message of the art work? Is it being used symbolically? If so, how?

