The frames

# Overview

The frames – subjective, cultural, structural, and postmodern – are tools used to provide different perspectives or viewpoints for understanding the relationships between the ‘agencies of the artworld’: artist, artwork, world, and audience. The frames allow for a deeper focus on particular aspects of artworks and artist practice.

The orientations provided by the four frames offer a flexible and robust lens through which to interpret artmaking, art criticism and art history. The frames are not definitive but provide an interpretive scaffold from which students can generate understanding.

This resource provides teachers with broad examples of how each frame can be used to explore the function of the ‘agencies of the artworld’ and the relationships between them.

The vocabulary and questions provided can guide classroom discussions or scaffold writing tasks, including critical and historical studies and students’ reflections on their artmaking.

# The subjective frame

The subjective frame can be used to interpret art from a personal or individual perspective. Meaning is understood in relation to feelings and emotions, personal and psychological experiences, imagination and fantasy, and/or the world of dreams and the subconscious.

## The subjective frame and the conceptual framework

The frames give a particular perspective about relationships between the ‘agencies of the artworld’ – artist, artwork, audience, and world. In the subjective frame:

* Artists are understood as individuals whose practice is informed by their personal experiences, including their thoughts, emotions, memories and imagination.
* Artworks are understood as records of personal experiences, feelings, memories, and/or the imagination.
* Audiences interpret artworks on a personal level, and may relate aspects of the artwork to their own individual experiences.
* The world is understood through personal experiences and individual perspectives.
* The world can also include the world of imagination, fantasy, dreams, and the subconscious.

A deeper understanding of the subjective frame is revealed by considering relationships between multiple ‘agencies of the artworld’:

* Artists use their individual emotional, imaginative, or intuitive understandings of human experiences to make their artworks meaningful on a personal level.
* Artworks may cause a deeply felt emotional or sensory response in audiences.
* Audiences interpret artworks on a personal level and are influenced by their own personal experiences and understanding of the world.
* Artists are influenced by their individual understanding of the world based on their personal experiences, emotional responses, and imagination.

### Subjective frame glossary

* Emotion – artworks that represent human emotions - examples include joy and happiness, contentment, love, excitement, fear, boredom, anxiety, anger, frustration, and anticipation.
* Memory – artworks can be inspired by the artist’s memories of a particular time, place, event or experience.
* Individual experiences – artists might explore their own individual experiences or record the individual experiences of others.
* Personal responses – audiences can draw on their own experiences, taste, and understanding of art when interpreting artworks.
* Sensory experiences – artworks can describe or cause sensory experiences. These could include the ‘five senses’ of vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste, or other ‘internal’ senses such as balance, movement, hunger, or pain.
* Psychological experiences – these can include ideas about the mind and human behaviour, including mental health and disorders.
* Dreams and the subconscious – artists can be inspired by subconscious and dream states. These works are often described as ‘surreal’.
* Fantasy and imagination – artists may imagine new worlds, characters, objects, creatures and other concepts in their artmaking, as well as drawing ideas from the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction.

### Sample questions – subjective frame

* What clues does the title of the artwork give about its intended meaning?
* How has the artist expressed their own emotions or represented the emotions of others? What visual qualities in the artwork represent emotions?
* How has this artist explored personal or psychological experiences, memory, or the subconscious? What visual qualities in the artwork represent this?
* How has the artist used imagination or fantasy in their artwork? How might this relate to human experiences?
* How might audiences make a personal connection to this artwork?
* What kind of emotional reaction might audiences have to this work? Does the artwork make audiences feel safe, uncomfortable, challenged, inspired, or confused?
* Does the artwork cause audiences to have a particular sensory experience? Are there elements they can see, hear, smell, touch or taste? Consider the impact of elements like the size of the work and use of space, light, sound, and interactivity.

# The cultural frame

The cultural frame can be used to interpret the ways meaning is shaped by social and cultural issues. These may include race and ethnicity, class and economic conditions, gender and sexuality, politics, technology, religion and spirituality, and the environment.

## The cultural frame and the conceptual framework

The frames give a particular perspective about relationships between the ‘agencies of the artworld’ – artist, artwork, audience, and world. In the cultural frame:

* Artists are influenced by their cultural identity or experiences with a particular social or cultural group.
* Artworks reflect, examine and explore a range of social, community, and cultural interests and issues.
* Audiences have their own cultural and social identities and may belong to particular social groups or communities.
* The world is understood through individual and community experiences of social issues, which may include race and ethnicity, class and economic conditions, gender and sexuality, politics, religion and spirituality, technology, and the environment.

A deeper understanding of the cultural frame is revealed by considering relationships between multiple ‘agencies of the artworld’:

* Artworks communicate an artist’s understanding of social issues. Artists may explore a specific perspective or point of view through their artmaking.
* Artworks may encourage audiences to consider and reflect on social and cultural issues.
* Artists use their artmaking practice to comment on social and cultural issues in the world.
* Audiences are influenced by their own social and cultural background and their understanding of the world.

### Cultural frame glossary

* Culture and communities – culture can refer to the shared knowledge, beliefs, laws, geography, and art styles of different social groups. Communities are groups of people with some common or shared cultural aspects.
* Race and ethnicity – a grouping of people according to their common ancestry, language, history and culture.
* Gender and sexuality – the particular experiences of individuals based on their gender and/or sexuality.
* Class and economics – ideas about socio-economic class and the impact of economic and cultural capital on different groups.
* Political issues – artworks that respond to contemporary political issues. These often include ideas that are contested or controversial and may include human rights, the environment, and government policies.
* Religion and spirituality – artworks that are inspired by the artist’s religion or spiritual beliefs. Audiences may respond to artworks through the lens of their religion or spirituality.
* Impact of technology – artworks that explore the way technology impacts communities.
* Humans and the environment – artworks that explore human relationships with the environment, and human impacts on the environment.

### Sample questions – cultural frame

* What clues does the title of the artwork give about its intended meaning?
* How has the artist represented a particular cultural, social, or community group?
* How is this artwork about a particular time or place?
* Is the artist making artwork from their own cultural perspective or exploring someone else’s?
* How does this artwork explore social issues like race and ethnicity, class and economic conditions, gender and sexuality, politics, religion and spirituality, the impact of technology, or the way humans interact with the environment?
* How does the artwork refer to any contemporary or historical events or ideas?
* What point of view, opinion, or cultural knowledge is the artist trying to communicate with audiences?

# The structural frame

The structural frame can be used to interpret art using a visual language through which meaning can be understood. This visual language includes systems of signs, symbols, and codes, and may refer to art historical conventions and practices.

## The structural frame and the conceptual framework

The frames give a particular perspective about relationships between the ‘agencies of the artworld’ – artist, artwork, audience, and world. In the structural frame:

* Artists are aware of the visual language of art and use systems of signs and symbols to represent ideas and communicate meaning.
* Artworks are symbolic objects that are constructed and communicate meaning through the use of visual language, including materials and techniques that represent ideas.
* Audiences are visually literate and aware of conventions in visual arts and the systems of signs and symbols used to communicate meaning.
* The world is understood in through visual language – sets of codes, symbols and conventions that are understood by both artists and audiences.

A deeper understanding of the structural frame is revealed by considering relationships between multiple ‘agencies of the artworld’:

* Artists embed artworks with particular meanings that are communicated using visual language including signs, symbols, and coded meaning which artists ay develop themselves.
* Artists use their knowledge of the world, including the artworld and art history, to apply or develop visual language to communicate their understanding of aspects of the world.
* Artworks may reference existing ideas in the artworld, including formal conventions and aesthetics associated with particular art movements, periods, styles, subject matter and genres.
* Audiences apply their knowledge of the artworld and visual language to decode and interpret symbolic meaning in artworks.

### Structural frame glossary

* Signs, symbols, and codes – ideas from the study of semiotics – how meaning is constructed and communicated in an artwork using signs, symbols, and codes that are understood by both artist and audiences.
* Visual language – the way meaning is communicated in a visual artwork through its visual qualities as well as signs, symbols and codes.
* Hidden and layered meaning – signs, symbols, and codes can be used in ways that are not immediately obvious or may require specific knowledge to understand
* Materials and techniques – the way artists use particular materials and artmaking techniques in their practice and the way these communicate meaning.
* Composition – decisions the artist has made about placement of different features and elements within their artwork. Compositional choices can affect the meaning and aesthetic impact of a work.
* Subject matter – refers to what is represented in an artwork. Broad categories could include portrait, landscape, and still life.
* Art style/period/movement – examples could include impressionism, minimalism, cubism, land art, renaissance, classical, surrealism.
* Aesthetics – refers to the way value, beauty, and taste are explored in the artworld.

### Sample questions – structural frame

* What clues does the title of the artwork give about its intended meaning?
* Describe the visual qualities of the artwork and compositional techniques used by the artist. Refer to how the artist has used line, shape, colour, space, texture, lighting, balance, emphasis, repetition.
* How does this artwork fit into a genre, style, or convention in visual arts? Some examples could include portraits, still life, landscape, the nude, figurative sculpture, self-portraits, abstract painting.
* Does this artist belong to a particular movement, group, or period? What evidence is there to suggest this? Some examples could include impressionism, minimalism, cubism, land art, renaissance, classical, surrealism.
* Do particular features in the artwork have a symbolic, hidden, or coded meaning? This could include the subject matter (what is shown in the artwork) and the way the artist has arranged and composed the artwork. Could these features have different meanings for different audiences?
* Do the materials or techniques used by this artist have their own symbolic meaning? How does this impact the overall meaning of the artwork?

# The postmodern frame

In the postmodern frame, traditional and mainstream ideas are challenged, and new ideas and technologies are explored using practices including appropriation and intertextuality, and through the use of humour, parody, satire and irony.

## The postmodern frame and the conceptual framework

The frames give a particular perspective about relationships between the ‘agencies of the artworld’ – artist, artwork, audience, and world. In the postmodern frame:

* Artists are aware of trends and issues in contemporary art and use innovative practices to explore new ideas and techniques that challenge traditional or mainstream values.
* Artworks are conceived as visual 'texts' that may feature reconfigurations or responses to previous texts, explore popular culture, or represent innovative applications of new ideas or technologies.
* Audiences are aware of power relationships within the world and artworld, and are also empowered to bring their own challenge, doubt, and scepticism to their interpretations of artworks.
* The world consists of power relationships that are challenged and exposed, as well as an archive of source material to be re-interpreted.

A deeper understanding of the postmodern frame is revealed by considering relationships between multiple ‘agencies of the artworld’:

* Artists use experimental and innovative practices to produce artworks that may explore contemporary ideas and new technologies.
* Artists challenge dominant and mainstream views about what is of value in art, by questioning and exposing power structures in the world.
* Audiences interact with artwork in innovative ways. Artworks may be interactive and require a degree of audience participation or input. Audiences may engage with artworks in non-traditional ways such as social media and new media.
* Artworks question or challenge traditional and dominant ideas about the world. Artworks may take on their own meaning beyond the intentions of the artist.

### Postmodern frame glossary

* Appropriation – postmodern artworks often deliberately use recognisable elements of other well-known artworks, texts, or media to re-interpret or re-examine the meaning of those texts.
* Challenge, doubt, scepticism – mainstream and traditional values may be questioned, challenged, or interrogated by postmodern artists.
* Power relationships – refers to the way individuals and institutions exercise social power and influence in the world and artworld.
* Humour, irony, satire – artists often use these techniques to challenge mainstream or traditional values, often through appropriation or a humorous/ironic juxtaposition of images/ideas.
* Popular culture – the world of movies, TV, music, and social media. Can include subcultural groups and fandoms.
* Contemporary art – generally refers to art made in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Sometimes referred to as the ‘postmodern era’
* New technologies – artworks that make use of experimental and emerging technologies, as well as innovative or alternative uses of existing technology.
* Diversity and representation – refers to the way a diverse range of social groups are represented and have agency in the world/artworld. Can also refer to art historical investigations that re-examine artists and artworks from the past using ideas and perspectives from the present.

### Sample questions – postmodern frame

* What clues does the title of the artwork give about its intended meaning?
* How does this artwork reference or appropriate elements of other artworks, media, texts, or ideas? How does this impact the artwork’s meaning?
* What ideas or social values are challenged by this artwork? Why might the artist have chosen to challenge these particular ideas or values?
* How does this artwork break, challenge, or re-interpret any artmaking rules, traditions or conventions? Why might have influenced the artist’s choices to do this?
* How has the artist used humour, irony, satire or parody in their artwork? How does this impact the artwork’s meaning?
* Does this artwork make use of new or innovative technologies? How does this impact the work’s meaning?
* How might audiences interpret this work in ways other than what the artist intended?
* How has the meaning or value of a historic artwork changed over time?