

To Yoram  
For Emmanuel, Édén and Raphaël

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*How to Talk to Children about Modern Art*

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# How to Talk to CHILDREN ABOUT MODERN ART

Françoise Barbe-Gall

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## 6 The Crucifixion

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)

1930

Oil on laminate

51 x 66 cm

Picasso Museum, Paris, France

### It's all muddled up

In this painting everyone is moving in different directions and talking at the same time. It captures a very muddled and noisy scene.

### What's happening?

It's a scene described in the gospels where Jesus, condemned to death, is hung on a cross. There's a blood-red figure at the top of the ladder hammering a nail through his hand.

### It's very colourful

It helps you understand how many people are there. Even if you don't understand it straight away you immediately sense how intense the colours are because they are conveying powerful emotions. Each colour speaks volumes – the red, yellow, green and blue.

### It looks as though there's an earthquake

Everyone there is collapsing – Jesus's mother and her friends. Their world is being turned upside down, and nothing but little fragments remain. Picasso found this way of showing that they are losing everything that's dear to them.

### There's a face with large red glasses

They're not glasses; the person has probably been crying so much that their eyes are all red. No doubt their huge head is very heavy – like when you have a headache if you are very tired. Their hair is standing up because they are afraid. But they are not about to leave.

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### It's completely different to other crucifixion paintings

Other crucifixion paintings – the ones that had been painted for centuries – show the scene as clearly as possible. But Picasso has imagined the *atmosphere* at the crucifixion. He didn't want to show the event but to paint what you would have *felt* if you had been there rather than being calmly in a museum or reading a book. That's why you can't make anything out to start with – it's as disconcerting as a punch in the face.

### **How can you tell who is who?**

Most of the characters are in the same positions as in the traditional paintings. Mary Magdalene is in tears right up against Christ and the tiny centurion Longin is piercing Jesus's side with his lance. In the foreground are the bodies of two criminals (thieves who were crucified on the same day) and the roman soldiers who are playing dice for Jesus's tunic. Finally on the right hand side the presence of the Virgin Mary is suggested by the raised hands and the blue veil. The figure with the red eyes might be the young Saint John.

### **What does the green ball represent?**

The shape in the top left hand side of the painting might evoke two things; either the large stone which will be rolled in front of Jesus's tomb or maybe the sponge dipped in gall – or vinegar – which Steven the soldier will hold up to Jesus's face. It's so big because Jesus sees it close up. The choice of green is significant because it's the colour of mould as well as springtime – the painting swings between life and death.

### **Is that a house on the right?**

Mary, the mother of Christ, symbolizes the Church which gathers together all Christians and Picasso conveys that idea by showing a little church. Her blue veil is made to seem longer by a sloped roof – like you might see on a house. We can also see the foot of the blue dress and the face of the virgin extended like a blue and white ribbon towards her son. The blue conveys the infinity and peace of heaven to several places like a caress – it appears between the rungs of the ladder, on Mary Magdalene's foot and also on one of the thieves.

### **What's a drum doing there?**

The drum makes a noise – it's not a commonplace object in a crucifixion scene but Picasso adds it in to compound the sense of chaos. Hitting, beating, making vibrations and mutterings . . . The dice rolling on its surface make an absolute din. An everyday sound in real life becomes intolerable for someone who's suffering.

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### **Why is Jesus all white?**

He's pale because he has been bleeding. But that's not the only reason. When added together all the other colours in the spectrum produce white light. The painting shows that Christ is the only one to create that unity. The tumult of the world around him is expressed through the many colours whereas he symbolizes absolute light. Whatever Jesus touches, the wood of the cross, or Mary Magdalene, is quite transformed by it. White also symbolizes the passage from one state to another. In ancient Rome students would take their exams wearing a white toga. In fact our word 'candidate' even comes from the Latin for bright white.

### **How can we make sense of these characters – they all seem so monstrous**

That's because Picasso was following the principle of telling the truth no matter how ugly it might be. Mary Magdalene is reduced to an open screaming mouth as if all her life is in that cry. She has no strength for anything else. When pain is so raw it stops everything else from existing, it takes over everything and stops you from even thinking of anything else. Picasso had the courage to turn his back on classical forms and to show not what can be seen of another's suffering but what you can *feel* in your very soul and is impossible to share – the feeling of being ripped to shreds. The world he paints is lost in horror and his painting simply translates the atrocity of it. It's the horror that transforms the people.

### **Is Picasso mocking religion?**

No, quite the contrary. He is a Spanish painter imbued with the Catholic tradition so it's quite natural for him to deal with such a central theme. But by giving it a human dimension he brings new life to the subject. Historically art which was designed to be didactic would focus on suffering as a route to redemption. Picasso was no longer interested in that pedagogical role but neither did he pour scorn on it. People had got so used to seeing the same subject elegantly treated that they had forgotten its meaning. Picasso sees it as a scene of torture and execution. A large crucifixion painted by Grünewald in 1516 played a key role in Picasso's work because for the first time it showed the scene in all its cruelty (it's the source of the virgin's raised arms and motif of the distorted limbs that we see here). But Picasso wanted to go further than Grünewald and show things with even more directness.



## 7 *The Human Condition*

Rene Magritte (1898–1967)

1933

Oil on canvas

100 x 81 cm

National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA

### **It's nicely painted**

This artist liked his paintings to imitate reality as closely as possible. He also wanted his work to be very clean – that's why this picture is very smooth, without any discernable brushstrokes.

### **The window's rounded at the top**

The curved shape softens the painting a little but it also makes us think of other things – the curvature of the earth or the shape of an eye for example. It's very peaceful there in front of this little corner of the landscape and thanks to the little curve detail we can see that the painter has a mass of ideas in mind.

### **You can look out of the window**

Because the curtains are open we can see the scenery very clearly: a little path passes in front of the house, there's a small tree next to a thicket and in the distance you can see the edge of a forest. It's a very solitary place – the painter probably doesn't get many visitors.

### **What is that on the ground?**

It's the three legs of an easel with their screws for adjusting the height. A canvas rests on the easel, held in place by the little wooden bracket at the top. On the right hand you can see the tacks fixing the canvas to its frame all down one side. On the left the canvas overlaps the edge of the curtain a little – you can see the top corner outlined against the fabric.

### **You can't see the real landscape**

Yes, the picture placed in front of the window blocks our view of the scenery, but to the right of the canvas you can see that the little path and trees continue from where the painting ends and the clouds are even the same shape. So we can assume that the painting on its easel must be an exact depiction of what must lie behind it.

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### **Why haven't they put the painting on the wall?**

Magritte wanted to show both a painting and the thing it is representing at the same time. If he had painted them side by side we could have been able to compare one against the other, but since both the images would have been the same it was simpler just to paint one.

### **It's not possible for a painting to be so exactly like the reality**

No it's not, as Magritte well knew. But he wonders what it would be like if it *were* possible. If it *were* possible, maybe a painting could adjust to fit with nature like a piece of a jigsaw and then we wouldn't be able to tell the difference between reality and the image. For Magritte painting was, above all, about asking questions which mostly went unanswered.

### **Is it the window of his studio?**

It's his drawing room window in front of which he would often paint. Magritte mostly painted in his apartment in a very orderly fashion. He would not let his painting take up too much space and at the end of each day he would tidy away all his things. You can see here there is nothing lying about. Maybe it's also a way of suggesting that the artist's thought process is more important than the physical creation of the paintings themselves.

### **Why are the curtains given such prominence?**

Firstly to recreate the room accurately. We can tell from photographs of Magritte's home that he has reproduced the curtains perfectly here. Curtains also add a theatrical element – they make it clear that Magritte is unveiling something and conversely that he could equally close them up, leaving us with nothing to look at. We are privileged but at the same time reliant on the painter's good will.

### **Is the landscape behind the painting actually exactly as it appears on the painting?**

That's a very natural question and exactly what Magritte wants us to ask, which automatically puts you on your guard. Watch out! There is no landscape other than this one here because a painting is only the image of a thing and not the thing itself. It's the illusion the painter creates that makes us believe in a reality hidden by the canvas on the easel. In real life it would be there, but here it's a trick. Beneath the layer of paint there is nothing.

### **Did he paint it for fun?**

When you first see it you might well wonder whether Magritte painted this for fun because while it seems a very simple painting the more you look at it the more complex you realize it is. Like in a game the mystery gets deeper and deeper but in the end you see that there is no real answer. Magritte expresses his thinking through images just as others use words. He leads the viewer by the hand deep into the puzzle so that we ask questions about what we're seeing. So yes, you could say that it's for fun – but it's done very seriously.



### **It's as though the painted canvas was actually transparent**

The window has transferred some of its transparency to the canvas – because we see the landscape through the window we also perceive the painted landscape in the same way. Magritte is recalling a very old definition which has been significant throughout the history of art. During the renaissance, the Italian architect Alberti wrote 'A painting is a window on the world.' He was suggesting that, thanks to perspective, a painting could give the impression of depth and make us forget the surface. In fact in old paintings you don't see the surface of the canvas or wood but instead you believe in a third dimension which is, of course, just an illusion.

### **Why is it called *The Human Condition*?**

Perhaps to say that you can't really understand it, that you can't be sure of anything and that it's the nature of man to look for answers without ever reaching any certainty, or even that man is always caught in the trap of his own illusions. But it wasn't Magritte who chose the names of his paintings; he left that task to his friends – although he did of course have power of veto. But a title like this shows you the extent to which his work was aiming for more than simple storytelling.

### **The scenery ought to be in the sun**

Yes it should. That's why he shows the shadows cast by the easel's feet. But the little canvas in front of the window is perfectly lit . . . Magritte's paintings may seem clinical in their precision and show what can be seen in almost obsessive detail but they do not actually show reality. They contain tricks and contradictions to make us think. In the end, the painter is literally saying that painting in general – as represented by the picture here – shows with clarity what in real life is far from clear. In doing so he reaffirms one of art's most important functions.

### **What's Surrealist about a painting like this?**

Surrealism liked deliberately strange images – metamorphoses, incongruous associations between shapes, characters or situations. So it took dreams and nightmares as its subjects and gave them free rein (see Dalí, work 8). But it also took into account the difficulty, the worry or unease we can feel sometimes in the most mundane of situations. Magritte's work is Surrealist in that it shows an awareness of a gap and a slide towards chaos. Reality is there, clearly recognizable, but it is unsettled by something very profound. For him that's how the greatest of mysteries can be expressed.