

Discover Manchester Art Gallery Unspoken trail: body language, relationships and art

Paintings from Manchester Art Gallery's collection
chosen by *Start* participants



Artists and participants in a series of well-being workshops called *Unspoken* have chosen the paintings on this trail to explore body language and relationships in art. Follow the trail, view the paintings and reflect on the related questions.

We all communicate non-verbally, both intentionally and unconsciously, signalling our thoughts and feelings through our body language.

Visual artists use the body language of their subjects to convey emotions and relationships, and to create stories.

Being able to read other people's feelings helps us to build good relationships. Understanding our own and other people's emotions is essential to our well-being.

We've included comments made by the participants so that you can compare them to your own responses. The trail includes a couple of activities you might like to try in the gallery or after you leave.

We hope you enjoy spending time in the gallery and engaging with these artworks.

We haven't included much information about the paintings or artists, but you can find out about them from the labels in the gallery, the interactive resource in the entrance hall and our website www.manchestergalleries.org

There is a plan on the back of this leaflet to help you find the paintings mentioned in the trail.

Unspoken is a partnership project between Manchester Art Gallery and *Start*, part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust. *Start* enables people to use art to improve, protect and maintain their mental well-being.

The paintings included here are all displayed on the stairway and balcony in the gallery entrance hall. We suggest you start by the large text panel on the right at the top of the main staircase.





1. On the Balcony 1898
John William Godward

2. Battledore 1906
Leonard Campbell Taylor

Compare the two groups of three women in these paintings.
What do you notice about their facial expressions and postures?
Does this tell you anything about the relationships between them?
How have the artists composed the figures to convey an atmosphere?
Which painting would you rather inhabit?

What did the participants say?

The participants were asked to write a diary entry for one of the women in the paintings. Alan chose the central figure in *On the Balcony*.

"Had a nice lunch. It was a nice day so sat out on the balcony but T and V followed!!! Can't seem to get away from them. Waiting for A to come home to see what gifts he has and hopefully I will get the best one. Tomorrow I will go to the beach and with a bit of luck I can get some time on my own with A. PS My ball of string has not got bigger."



3. On the Threshold 1900
Edmund Blair Leighton

4. A Passing Cloud about 1891
Marcus Stone

What is the relationship between the two people in each painting?
What gives you this impression?

Think about the following to help you form an impression:

Proximity – how close are they to each other?

Orientation – are they facing towards or away from each other?

Posture and gesture – are they standing, sitting, slouching, leaning..?

Facial expression – are they joyful, sad, angry, surprised, disgusted, afraid..?

What did the participants say?

"There is a distance between them. The woman is unhappy and alone. She is feeling weak and in need of support. The man has a tightly closed fist. He is disappointed and fed up."

Which painting were they talking about?

People watching exercise

Look out for two people engaged in conversation out of earshot. See how many of the non-verbal cues listed above you can pick up. Make sure you can observe without causing your subjects concern! The café could be a good place.



5. Byron's Early Love, 'A Dream of Annesley Hall' 1856
Edward Matthew Ward

What do you think is going on in this painting? What's the story?

Do you think there will be a happy ending for anyone? If yes, for whom?

What did the participants say?

"The man is observing people at a party and I think he likes the woman we can see but he is sad because she is talking with another man. I don't think this will have a happy ending for him as he looks so sad and lacking any hope. You can see this in his face."

Mindfulness exercise

Having to do many things at once is a predicament of modern life. This exercise will give you an opportunity to try a bit of 'non-doing' or mindfulness.*

You may want to find a quiet place to sit down before you begin or you could just stand looking at the painting.

Three minute breathing practice

- just notice your breath moving in and out of your body without changing anything



6. Osier Peeling (on the Cam) 1875
Robert Walker Macbeth

What do you notice about the way the artist has portrayed this 19th century working mother?

Observe the woman's posture – her body is turned towards her work but where is she looking?

What do you think this tells us?

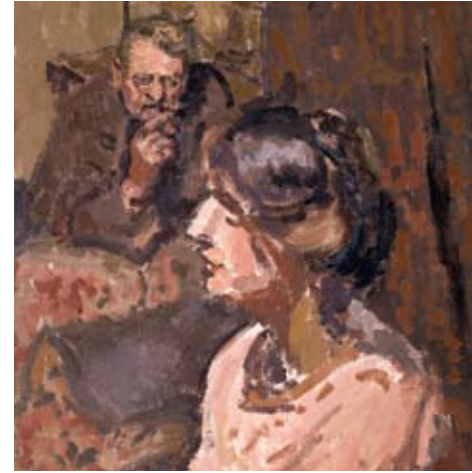
What did the participants say?

"A worried expression on her face. An industrious pose with her body facing the task and her mind on the child. She is painted like a heroine, like Britannia."

- become aware of any sensations and feelings, without judging them or yourself
- when your attention wanders (as it always does) just gently bring it back to your breathing
- notice if there are any changes in the way you are seeing things or feeling.

You can repeat this exercise whenever you feel a need for some space in your busy life.

*A definition of mindfulness: "Awareness, of present experience, with acceptance." (Mindfulness and Psychotherapy, C. Germer, R. Siegal and P. Fulton (Eds.), New York: Guilford Press, 2005)



7. Two Figures: What Maisie Knew 1914
Walter Richard Sickert

What is the story between this man and woman?

Are they married, friends, family, strangers, enemies?

Give yourself a couple of minutes to notice the thoughts you have and the stories you tell yourself about this couple.

What if the painting had a different title? Look at the different titles below and consider how your interpretation changes with each of them. Which one most fits your original feeling about what was going on in this painting?

A Broken Promise

The Patient

A Proposition

The Letter

Hubby and Marie

(This is the title that was used for this painting until recent research uncovered Sickert's original title.)

What would you call this painting?

What did the participants say?

"I look at her and see so much longing in her. She's longing for something, maybe visualising something or remembering something. She's not even hearing him. She is somewhere else."



8. The Letter (also called *The Convalescent*)
possibly about 1924
Gwen John

Look at the woman in the painting. What do you think the letter contains? Who might it be from?

Look at her expression and posture. Does the artist give you any clues about what she's feeling as she reads? What do you think this tells us?

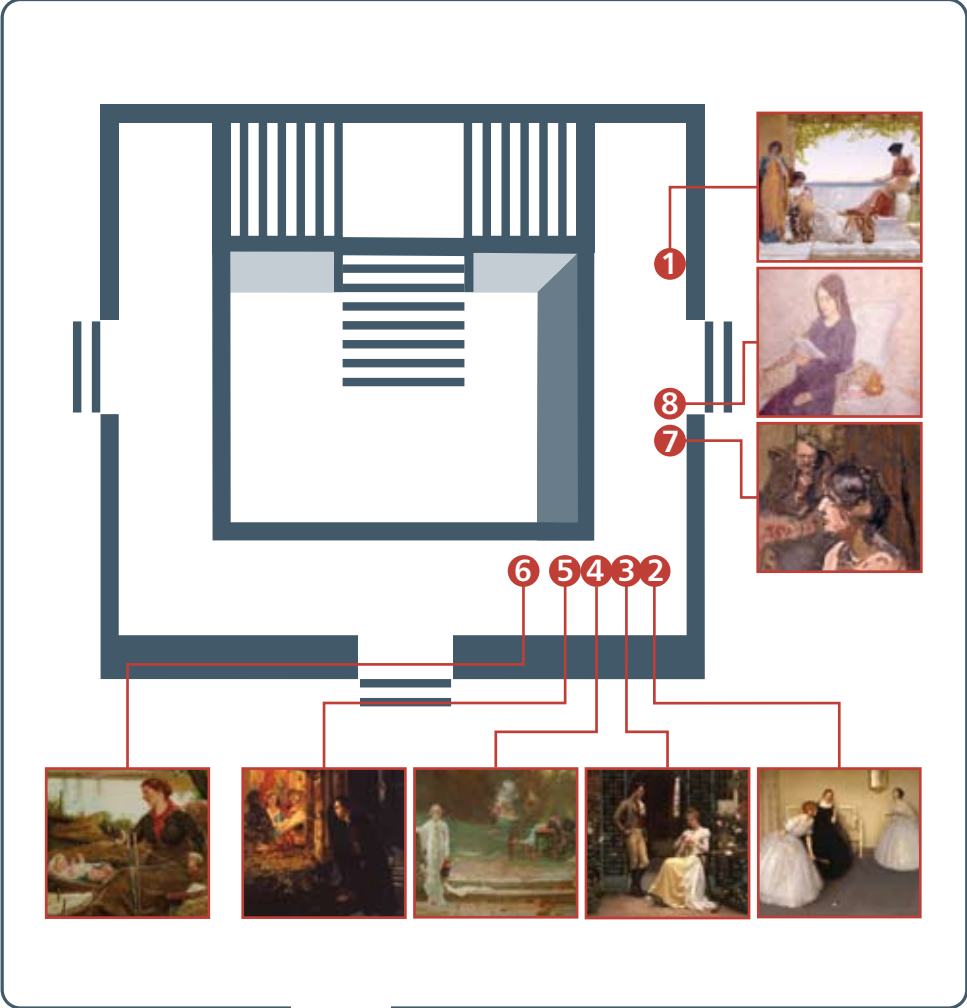
What did the participants say?

"There are no shadows, which is curious, and no perspective. This makes you look closer, harder."

"Very ordinary, mundane and yet..."

"She's self-contained. She's completely absorbed by the letter, giving it all her attention but you can tell from the way her hand rests in her lap that her body is relaxed. She looks calm but not sad. This painting is about this woman's inner life which is by its nature a mystery to the observer."

First floor – balcony



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