

## **The Rules of Art?**

The Rules of Art? brings together historic and contemporary art to explore relationships between the old and the new.

Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales houses one of Europe's finest art collections. 50,000 art works span over five centuries of history. But whose history?

In 1667, the French Academy created a ranking of subjects shown in paintings. Works relating to the Bible or important moments from history were considered the most prestigious an artist could create. A vase of flowers was considered the lowest. Known as the Hierarchy of Genres, this was - in order of importance:

- 1. History Painting**
- 2. Portrait**
- 3. Scenes of Everyday Life**
- 4. Landscape**
- 5. Still life**

This structure influenced Western art of all mediums for centuries and dictated what artists created and what museums collected - and also what they excluded. The Rules of Art? is organised within these same categories. We want to look at the Rules, see them with fresh eyes and challenge them.

Working with artists, writers and community partners, elements of the interpretation of the exhibition come from a range of different voices; evolving as the exhibition progresses. These voices will question whose stories are being told, who is telling them, and who has been excluded.

## **History**

Art Academies in the 17th and 18th centuries considered History Painting to be the highest form of art. These works depict passages from the Bible, scenes from Greek and Roman mythology and key events in a nation's history. In Britain, History Painting became a means of recording and glorifying the expanding British Empire.

History Painting fell out of fashion from the mid-19th century, and declined still further after the end of the Second World War. However, the same visual language and grand themes continue to inspire artists today.

## Still Life

Whereas History Painting has largely disappeared as a genre, Still Life continues to thrive. Originally considered the lowest form of art according to the Academies, Still Life was given this lowly position as it does not portray the human form.

Though in existence before the 17th century, the genre came to prominence in the 1600s in the Dutch Republic. Paintings of lavish bouquets of flowers, food and other commodities from around the world spoke to the Republic's growing global domination.

The genre was greatly promoted by artists in the late 19th century. Works that are so familiar to us today caused a sensation when they were first exhibited as they upended the Academy's view of High Art.

The Still Life has hidden depths. It can carry profound allegorical and historic meaning, whilst also embodying space, reflection and isolation.

## Portraits & The Everyday

Before the invention of photography in the 1830s, someone's likeness could only be captured through a painted, drawn or sculpted portrait. Only the richest in society could afford this luxury. Historic portraiture depicts those with wealth and power, often in an idealised way. Overwhelmingly, the sitters are men. Even up to the 20th century, lone female sitters in portraits are rare.

From the 17th century, artists began to produce paintings of everyday life. These give us a sense of ordinary people's experience. As nameless members of 'lower classes' were shown, the genre was considered a lesser form of art than portraits of the rich and powerful. This creates a marked divide in the representation of society.

From the late 19th century, the genres slowly fractured as society itself changed. Modern and contemporary artists have used portraiture and scenes of everyday life in ways that both compliment and subvert the art of the past.

## Landscape

Originally considered by Art Academies as one of the lowest forms art, Landscape remains a vibrant genre. The richness of this story in Wales opens up important debates around identity and place. We can also explore the extremes of the use and representation of our environment.

Painting the landscape, and the appreciation of nature for its own sake, was pioneered in Wales in the 18th century. A revived literary and artistic interest in the Celtic past also drew artists into Wales. The subsequent 'discovery' of the landscape, particularly of North Wales, made the country a haven for artists.

In the second half of the 20th century, artists began to use a variety of different techniques and materials. Using sculpture, photography and film, contemporary artists continue this same tradition whilst drawing attention to issues around climate change and land management.