

Thirteen Great Paintings

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This is my personal selection of 13 paintings – a baker’s dozen – which to me are ‘great’. ‘Great’ is a powerful word. Here I mean that they have a wideness of vision or depth of perception which reaches into some aspect of our human condition – who we are, where we come from, what is truly important. Today we are surrounded by images, on the TV, on the internet, holiday snaps, photos sent by friends on social media, in newspapers and magazines. This forces a whirl of pictures onto us every day. It is difficult, therefore, to stand back and pick out a small number of images which are not merely striking, shocking, titillating, pretty, technically virtuosic. I am limiting myself to paintings and so excluding photographs, sculptures, collages and installations. Many paintings were of their time and most of us would choose not to dwell on them now. I am thinking of the mythological pictures of renaissance times, the Christian devotional pictures of saints and Jesus from Catholic Europe in the 16th and 17th century, run-of-the-mill portraits of the rich and self important, of the futurist paintings of the 1920s which were motivated by the early cinema, with their superimposed frames of moving subjects.

I have found it difficult to limit myself to thirteen. It means that where I have seen many works from a famous painters I have had to restrict myself to just one. This will not always be their greatest painting, but one which to me summarises their best qualities, their way of seeing our world. I offer a few words on some, but mostly the pictures are what they are and stand for themselves. For me a crucial test of quality is whether you can look at a picture day after day, month after month and still see something new and interesting or comforting or amusing or otherwise fresh about it. There is a paradox in painting that though the paint is static on the canvas, the image portrayed has a life of its own. I suppose that great art of any form has this quality, and speaks truth to us.

1 The paintings

1.1 Jan and Hubert van Eyck: The Ghent altarpiece.



It's all here; the whole human story from Adam and Eve to worship of The Lamb in the world to come.

1.2 Peter Bruegel: The Tower of Babel

He painted three versions of this Biblical allegory. Here are two. They depict man's folly in striving after vain things, vanity projects for self aggrandisement. A modern repainting of this might have Donald Trump as the king-figure demanding to know from the poor grovelling workmen why they haven't got it finished before the election. Or perhaps Boris Johnson telling everyone yet again 'Let's get Babel done'.

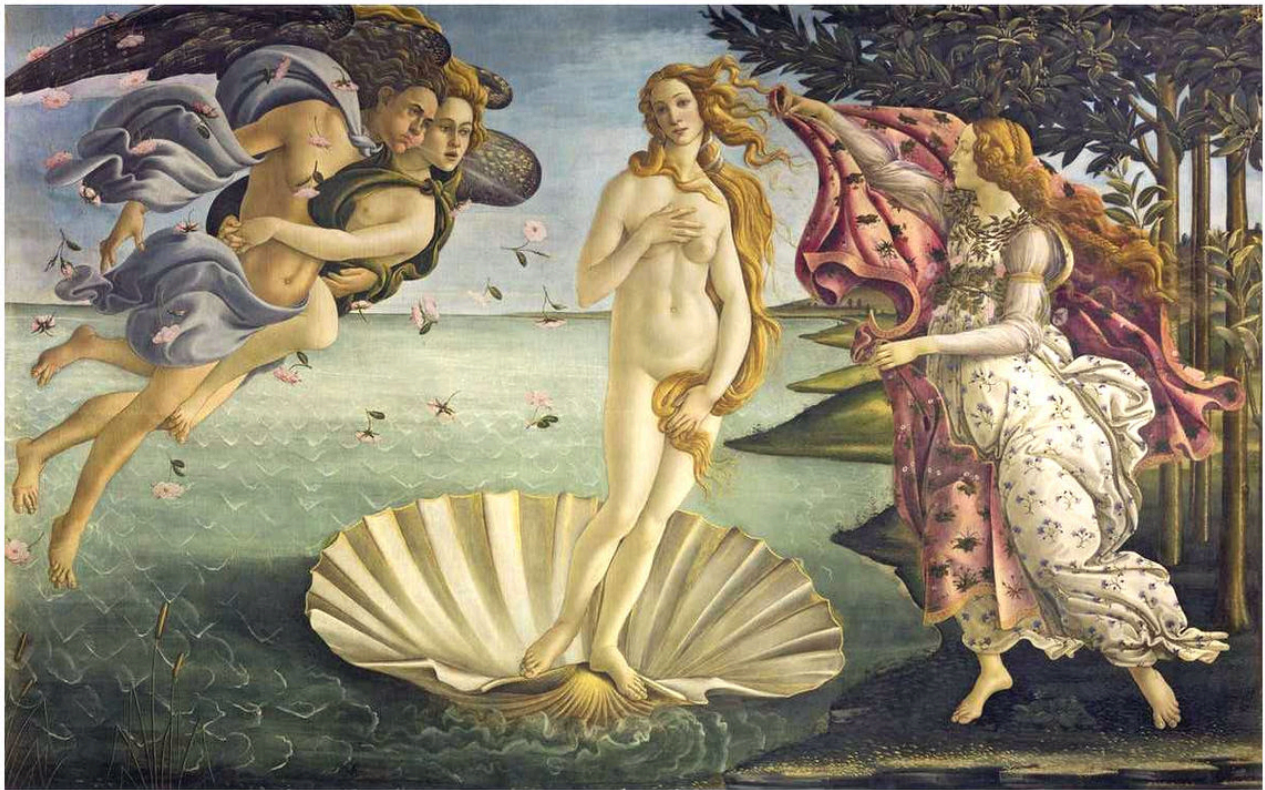
The second version, with the tower topping into the clouds, is darker and more menacing, as if the Tower were at last revealing its true nature.





1.3 Sandro Botticelli: The Birth of Venus

Yes, I know, everyone knows this. But it is marvellous. A simple, powerful composition. Birth of a new age. And her hair!!.



1.4 Titian: Love Sacred, Love Profane

Tiziano Vecelli, known as Titian, painted many great pictures and this is perhaps the most enigmatic. Who are they? What do they represent? What's in the box? What is going on the distant landscapes? Another simple, strong composition which contrasts the left half with the right, the heavenly with the earthly ... or is it the earthly with the heavenly?



1.5 Pieter de Hooch: Courtyard in Delft

The back yard of a house where ordinary people live. Mum and her little girl have been sweeping up and collecting eggs in the bag – or perhaps it is the clothes peg bag.



1.6 Jan Vermeer: Woman reading a letter

He painted several pictures on this theme. This has the simplest composition which can almost be reduced to coloured rectangles.. The woman is expecting a baby – what does the letter say? What would a letter (not a text message) say to her today? What does the map on the wall signify – boyfriend gone overseas?



1.7 Jacob van Ruisdael: Bentheim castle

He painted this castle several times. Here are two. The first is my choice. The Dutch produced some wonderful depictions of the land and sky. An expansive sense of space with some great walks up to the distant windmill.



1.8 Thomas Gainsborough: The Hon Mrs Graham

A great portrait by a great painter of portraits. She looks regal, aristocratic and aloof. The celebrity you would like to talk with but is beyond reach. The beauty you see across the room but dare not approach. I wonder what she is thinking.



1.9 John Constable: Salisbury Cathedral

This view from the meadows was painted in three stages: an initial sketch, a full sized sketch and the final version. Here are the last two. Which is the more 'romantic' and emotionally charged? – you decide. If I had to pick a runner-up from Constable it would probably be a watercolour of Stonehenge with rainbow effects scraped across the clouds, as in the final version here.





1.10 Paul Cezanne: Still Life with Onions

I debated whether to choose one of Cezanne's landscapes, with their faceted surfaces produced with single wide brush strokes. In the event here is a still life. He has the ability to imbue humble inanimate objects with a dignity and worth, to show how we should be grateful for simple things, including 'our dally bread'.



1.11 Vincent van Gogh: Wheat field with Cypresses

He painted this view from his mental hospital window several times. Here are the versions in New York and in London. Van Gogh has long been one of the most popular artists and many would have chosen his sunflowers or irises, or the swirling stars in *Starry Night*. These two versions of the wheat field with cypresses also swirl and squirm with restless agitation, as if the very clouds and plants were trying to wriggle into life.



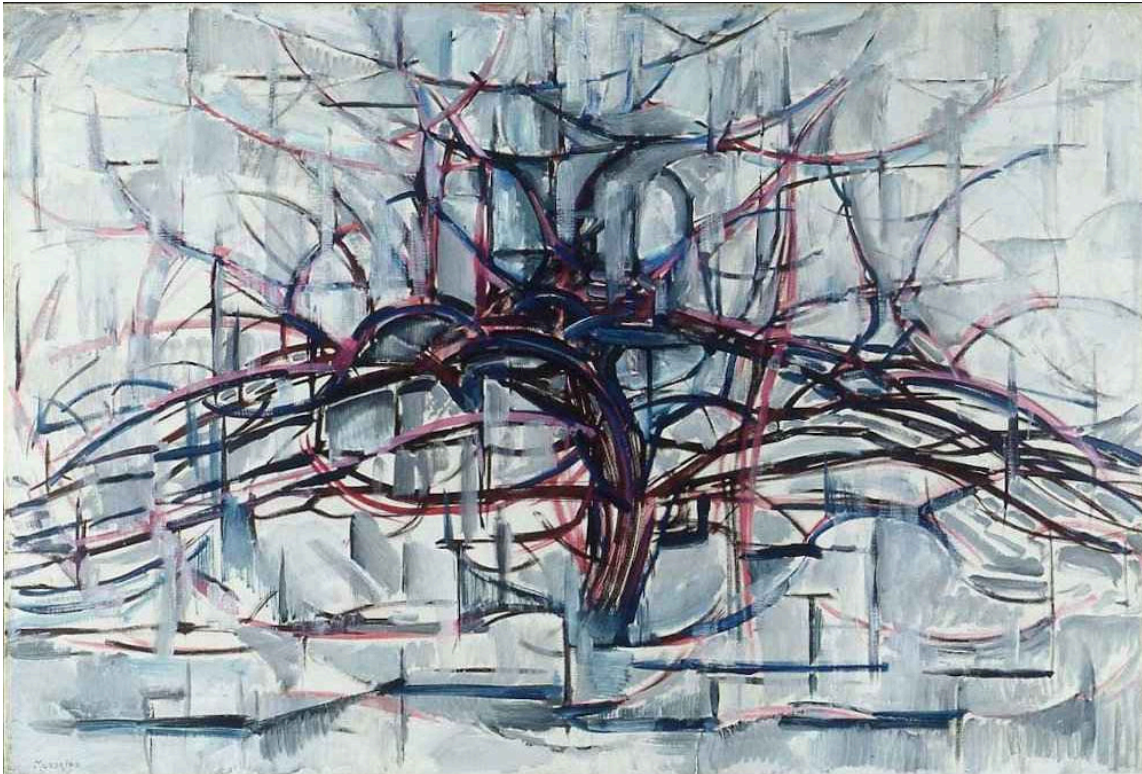
1.12 Amadeo Modigliani: Reclining nude woman

A sculptor by training, Modigliani painted 22 nudes to commission, all beautiful, simple and shaped by his skills as a sculptor. He had made of study of ancient Greek caryatids in architecture – female forms carved into pillars – and they have strongly influenced his drawing, particularly of faces and heads with elongated necks. His series of nudes link back to the paintings of the renaissance, closing the loop with my first chosen paintings.



1.13 Piet Mondrian: Tree

This painting displays the creative processes of analysis and synthesis of living forms into something new. Mondrian painted many trees pictures round about 1910. In these the branches morph into gently curved horizontal and vertical brush strokes which still say 'tree'.



2 Closing Remarks

Who is conspicuously missing?: Rubens, Rembrandt, Turner, Leonardo, Raphael, Picasso, and many more. I would have liked to include The Garden of Earthly Delights by Heironymus Bosch, the Return of the Hunters and Fall of Icarus by Bruegel, The Hay Wain by Constable, a landscape by Cezanne, and others. I realise, having made my choice, that there are none of a family or community groups, despite these being our smallest and most familiar social units. So let me tag on three final pictures.



Figure 1: Grant Wood: American Gothic. A middle aged couple tough it out through the Great Depression.



Figure 2: Mary Cassatt: Mother and child.



Figure 3: Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Wedding dance. A celebration, a party, a booze-up, a rave. Just looking at it makes you want to tap your feet and join in.