The Subjective Frame

1. Since the visual arts is an area in which personal and intimate qualities play vital roles, the Subjective Frame focuses on the personal relationships that both the artists and the audience have with an artwork and with writings about art. It looks at the way in which the audience will attempt to understand the personal ideas of the artist and the different ways people will respond to the artwork.

2. Using the Subjective Frame to look at an artwork (or a piece of art writing) involves asking questions such as:
   - How are feelings and experiences conveyed through the work?
   - What personal understanding of the subject is apparent and how is communicated?
   - Do you, as the audience, feel and understand the work?
   - What personal insights are offered by the artist/historian/critic?
   - Does the title of the work give a deeper insight to the work?
   - What emotional responses is the artist/historian/critic trying to get from the audience?
   - How is the personality of the artist/historian/critic conveyed?
   - How crucial is imagination to the production to an artwork, and why?
   - How are individual styles resolved in the artwork?
   - In what ways does the audience empathise (identify with) with the artist/historian/critic?
   - How are personal intentions conveyed through the artwork or writing?
Structural Frame

4 Within the visual arts, rules and conventions have been established to guide and develop approaches to artmaking. Even the activity of going against these standards (as demonstrated by the avant-garde artists of the modernist period, for example) highlights in itself a specific structure of artmaking that ignores traditional conventions. Within each practice there are conventions that artists adhere to and which can be assessed in a formal manner. The Structural Frame provides an account of these rules and conventions in an artwork, and how the work is pieced together. It provides an understanding about the form of the artwork and reveals the material and aesthetic qualities that make the work unique.

5 The Structural Frame, therefore, seeks to explain:
   - how artworks are made
   - the artist's intentions in the artwork
   - the types of visual languages used in artworks, and how these function
   - how artworks use different signs and symbols and how these are understood by an audience.

6 Art historians and critics use the Structural Frame to study the symbols and signs in an artwork. Through this they can understand how ideas and concepts are conveyed, and how they may relate to particular stylistic rules or convention: found in different historical periods.

7 Using the Structural Frame to look at an artwork involves asking questions such as:
   - Does the artwork suggest the use of organisation to compose the artwork? How?
   - What aesthetic principles does the artist employ in the production of the artwork?
   - What symbols and codes are used by the artist to convey ideas or experiences?
   - How is the artwork composed and what are some of the unique qualities attributed to it?
   - Is there a system to the way the artist/historian/critic conveys the message?
   - What is particular about the arrangement of the artwork and how important is order and placement?
   - What visual conventions are important to the artist?
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Here is a mindmap showing key aspects of the Subjective Frame.

- The way in which subjective or personal concerns can be paramount to an artist in his or her artmaking.
- The strategies of the artist that evoke personal responses in the audience. How does the audience respond or empathise with the artwork?
- The use of the artwork as a conduit (an agent or 'mouthpiece') for an artist's experiences.
- The intimacy of the artwork to the audience and/or artist.
- The personal beliefs and values of the artist as conveyed through the artwork.
- The artist's deeply felt spiritual, psychological or emotional experiences which can govern the process and the form of representation found in the artwork.
- The ability of artworks to revive or provoke emotional, sensory and intellectual responses from the audience.
Cultural Frame

1. The Cultural Frame highlights the fact that no artist works in a social vacuum and that all artworks reflect some aspects of the culture (the beliefs, ideas and social structures) in which they were produced. For example, the culture which produced Aboriginal rock carvings in central Australia is vastly different to that which produced academic paintings in eighteenth century France. This demonstrates how the time and place will greatly influence both the cultural significance of the artwork and the artist's approach to artmaking. It is important that you make this distinction when learning about the Cultural Frame as it will help you understand the artwork and artist in terms of their social identity and meaning. The HSC Visual Arts syllabus also refers to the term ideology, which means the values and beliefs held by a society.

2. The Cultural Frame can be used, for example, in looking at the genre of still life painting throughout history:
   - The Dutch painters of the 1800s sought to represent the genre of still life in a highly realistic manner. They attached particular symbolic qualities to the works using the visual conventions of the time.
   - In contrast, the still life paintings of the Cubists reflected a change in perception of the subject matter and employed different visual conventions that reflected the values of the time — they sought to discover new ways of viewing the world, rather than the traditional, naturalistic ways of the earlier painters.

3. It is the Cultural Frame which alerts the audience to the artist's philosophy and intention by looking at the culture which surrounds the artwork. This also applies to art historians and critics who must take into consideration the cultural expectations and influences on artists and artworks.

4. Using the Cultural Frame to look at an artwork involves asking questions such as:
   - Are the signs and symbols used by the artist specific to a particular culture? How might other cultures understand this?
- Does the artist attempt to reflect the attitudes of a time and place? How is this done?
- Beliefs about race, gender and social class can shape a society. These elements can be distilled in an artwork, giving an insight into the cultural values of the artist's world. How are these conveyed in the artwork?
- What ideological values are represented in the artwork?
- Is there a political significance in the artwork? What is it? Why is it there?
- Are there obvious political issues in the writings of art critics and historians?

6 Below is a mindmap of the issues involved in using the Cultural Frame.

Artists reflecting or depicting social circumstances in their works, and so become key agents for understanding culture and society.

Particular approaches to artmaking which are governed by the rules of different cultural groups – as cultures change over time, different art practices are created.

The impact of ideologies on the artist/critic/historian.

The key role of artworks in investigating issues of identity within culture, and the way in which issues such as race, gender, politics and class can be catalysts for artworks.

The forms of representation which acknowledge both the dominant aspects of society (the 'mainstream') as well as the marginalised groups.

The way art reflects the richness, diversity and uniqueness of culture and is not created in a social vacuum.
Postmodern Frame

The Postmodern Frame refers to the critical debates that are current in society and the artworld today. Postmodernism is a way of thinking which suggests that everything can be explained and interpreted in a number of different ways due to the changing nature of what is true and how we accept facts. This can be the most difficult frame to understand as it tends to escape clear definition, yet it is highly significant in the contemporary world.

In postmodernism:
- The idea of absolute rules, dominant styles and recognised conventions — as established in historic and modernist practices of criticism, history and artmaking — is dismissed.
- Accepted conventions — such as 'taste', 'culture' and 'style' — are critically brought into question and their validity is challenged.
- Representation is constructed by conditions between the artist, artwork and audience that can change at any moment and cannot be governed by universal laws.
- The meaning and significance of art can evolve (or devolve) at any given moment.
- There is a proposal that perhaps what is more important than the artwork is the way we look and understand the work, which even suggests that the audience is more important than the artist. Thus the role of the audience crucial in interpreting the artwork.
- Approaches to artmaking such as appropriation (copying an object or image from another visual source), irony (using humour or satire as an aesthetic convention), recontextualisation (changing or shifting the perceived meaning of an image or object to another context) and eclecticism (a style of art which features are borrowed from various other artistic styles) are not necessarily new, but they do challenge traditional modes of thinking. They highlight the constantly changing nature of art and the fluid quality of 'meaning'.

Whilst modernism presented the visual arts as a search for objectivity with the artist's practice, postmodernity suggests there can only be subjectivity within these practices, that is, there can be no objective judgment of the value of artworks.

Using the Postmodern Frame to look at an artwork involves asking questions such as:
- How do the artworks challenge the authority of history?
- Are traditions in art disregarded by the artist? How?
- What conventions are being critiqued (criticised) by the artist?
- How are signs and symbols being reinvented to create new meanings?
- Are conventions such as parody, appropriation, irony and wit used in the work?
- Does the artist recontextualise (put into a new context) the source of the image to create a different meaning?
- Have there been multiple reinterpretations of the artwork?
- Does the artwork seek to highlight the issues of marginalised groups in society?
- How does the artwork destabilise the audience's expectations?
- How do some artists show an anti-authoritarian approach in their artmaking?

**Postmodern Frame**

- The audience often taking over from the artist as the most important element in constructing meaning.
- Playful aesthetic conventions which attempt to destabilise modernist ideas and the canons of art.
- All components of an artwork seen as equally important, depending on who is viewing the work.
- Emerging technologies such as digital art have had a huge impact on aesthetic conditions.
- Critical readings of art which provide new meanings for previously marginalised groups (e.g., postcolonial theories of art).
- Recognition that language is the most important thing in communicating ideas, since meaning can shift during the critical readings of an artwork.
- Use of eclecticism, and irony, parody and recontextualisation of images and ideas.

**CHECKPOINT:**
1. The four Frames provide four focus areas for analysing artworks.
2. The Subjective Frame concentrates on the personal and emotional responses generated by an artwork, and the intentions of the artist.
3. The Structural Frame focuses on the rules and conventions followed in an artwork.
4. The Cultural Frame looks at the ideas and beliefs surrounding artists and artworks, which come from specific times and places in history.
5. The Postmodern Frame suggests there are many different meanings in artworks, and the audience who interprets them can be more important than the artist's intentions.