

## Meditation not Medication: Art for Wellbeing

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### Look at Paintings: a free-to-use website that combines Mindful meditation with Art Appreciation

#### Summary

The free website 'Look at Paintings' innovatively partners techniques of Mindful meditation with Art Appreciation, with the aim of producing immediate benefits to the viewer. My aim with this site is to support mental and physical wellbeing by giving people the means to enhance their own inner abilities to relax and cope better with the strains of life.

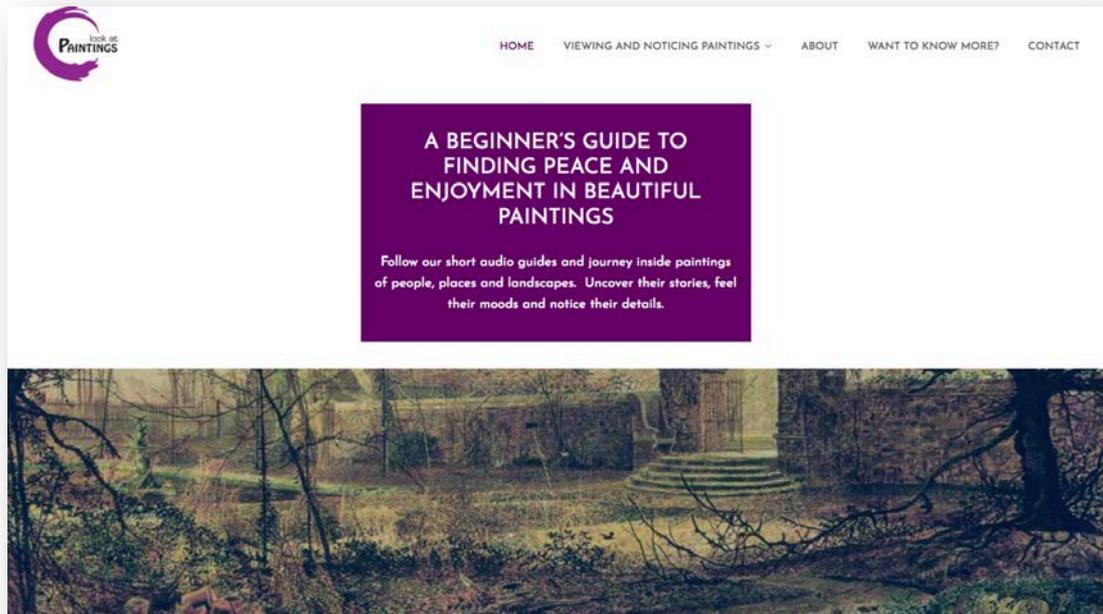
#### Detail

How can we find better ways to engage people's inner resources to manage their own wellbeing?

We know that meditation has a growing evidence base <sup>1,2,3</sup> for helping to reduce some forms of depression and anxiety, whilst also addressing certain physical issues such as high blood pressure and chronic pain. However Meditation is not easy, and does not suit everyone, nor is it advisable in every circumstance.

A meditative state can in fact be achieved in a number of ways, and does not necessarily require a classic Mindfulness approach. Participative practical arts activities can produce the state of Flow for instance, which is akin to Mindful meditation and has beneficial physical and mental effects. Likewise, the practice of viewing beautiful art has demonstrated significant and rapid drops in cortisol levels, has been shown to positively affect pain-perception, and can produce lowered heart-rate and blood-pressure readings. This effect has been dubbed the Relaxation Response<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> by researchers at Harvard University.

I have created a free-to-use website 'Look at Paintings' based on my lengthy experience as an Arts for Health practitioner, and my training in Mindfulness. I have aimed to combine Mindfulness techniques with the benefits of looking at Art. The objective is to enable users of the site to relax through engaging their curiosity, interest and emotions. There is also a diversional tactic at play, employing mechanisms to focus the attention on something new and refreshing for a short period of time.



Homepage for Look at Paintings

The premise of the website is that immersive guided Mindful meditations linked to works of Art will alleviate anxiety by reducing blood pressure, heart-rate and cortisol levels to produce the Relaxation Response. It is expected, from the evidence-base associated with both fields, that this response may last beyond the duration of the meditation.

'Look at Paintings' is an original idea and an original website. The approaches are innovative and unique.

## References

1. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013) *Full Catastrophe Living*
2. Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center (2015) *Mindfulness meditation trumps placebo in pain reduction* (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151110171600.htm>)
3. Woo, C.W., Ry, M., Buhle, J.T., Wager, T.D. (2015) *Distinct Brain Systems Mediate the Effects of Nociceptive Input and Self-Regulation on Pain*, *PLOS Biology*
4. Benson, H. and Klipper, M. Z. (2000) *The Relaxation Response*. HarperCollins, U.S.A.
5. Alleyne, R. *Looking at beautiful art can act as a painkiller*. *The Telegraph* 17.9.08
6. RSPH Working Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. (2013). *Arts, Health and Wellbeing Beyond the Millennium: How far have we come and where do we want to go?* London: Royal Society for Public Health.
7. Clow, A. & Fredhoj, C. (2006) *Normalisation of salivary cortisol levels and self-report stress by a brief lunchtime visit to an art gallery by London City workers*. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*, 3 (2). pp. 29-32

### About the Creator of Look at Paintings:

Wendy trained in Mindfulness at the University of Bangor, in Teaching at the University of Manchester and in Art at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has developed an internationally recognised model of using art for mental health. She led NHS Arts for Health services for 30 years and won a number of awards for this work. She now works freelance developing Creative Wellbeing programmes for the public.

## LIFE IN THE COUNTRY



There are six different galleries to choose from and over 60 images

## LOOKING AT INDIVIDUALS



Images are chosen to be accessible to beginners, having figurative detail and suggesting narratives to the viewer

## PEOPLE WATCHING



### Herd of Red Deer

JOHANN CHRISTIAN KRÖNER, 1899

#### Audio Guide

Please Choose the Audio Guide ▾

Each picture has at least one audio guide, some having two audio guides. The site is easy to use and will work on computers, tablets and phones.