

# Take One Picture at Norwich Castle

## *San Filippo IV*

Teacher's Pack

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Supporting material and ideas for teachers using *San Filippo IV* as part of the Take One scheme



*San Filippo IV* by Mary Webb, 2010

An image of the picture can be downloaded from our website:

<https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/norwich-castle/learning/teacher-led-trails-and-resources>

## Introduction to the painting

With its vibrant colour and use of shape, geometry and nature, *San Filippo IV* is a characteristic work by Mary Webb. Colour has always been central to her practice and she seeks it in the landscapes and buildings surrounding her at home in Suffolk and during her travels abroad. Many of her works are titled after the places that inspired them – landscape is a trigger for her work. As she puts it, ‘my concern is with colour and the spatial sensations and emotions it can evoke, frequently linked to the memory of place’.

*San Filippo IV* was inspired by the time Webb spent in the village of that name in Tuscany, Italy. She liked the ‘visual shock’ of Italy as compared to Suffolk, and she wanted to express this. She was also inspired by the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, close to San Filippo. The Baptistery features ‘a stunningly simple geometric design’ of local green-and-white marble on its outer walls. This was an original stimulus for Webb’s work, but in the development of the painting, she admits that the reference became fleeting. The Baptistery’s green marble squares were part of her initial idea, and she then looked for something with which to contrast them – something totally different which would anchor the painting. Thus she juxtaposed the green squares with the coloured ones.



Over the course of her decades-long career, Webb has developed her modernist approach and dedicated herself to the exploration of the abstract form through painting and printmaking. Her earlier paintings often show her working with squares and rectangles laid in horizontal and vertical arrangements. However, this painting reveals a new area of exploration for her. Although her grids have been broken by dynamic angles before, in *San Filippo IV* she combines this with the overlapping of the squares and their almost circular arrangement across the canvas. This combination plays with our perception of space and depth, effecting both recession and shallowness, and emphasising the flatness of the support. The painting looks for balance and harmony in the arrangement of the coloured squares.

Source: Eastern Daily Press, *A Conversation with Mary Webb*, Norwich Castle Nov 5<sup>th</sup>

## Further information on the work of Mary Webb

Extracts from Grieve, Alastair, “Colour, place and memory: the art of Mary Webb”, in *Mary Webb: Journeys in Colour* (Sainsbury Centre exhibition catalogue), July 2011

“At first sight Mary Webb’s work seems very simple. Easily recognisable geometric forms – the square, the half square, the right angle and the diagonal – define flat planes of colour. But look longer. We become involved in her subtle and exact balance of shapes, colours and tones. ...

“Their overall format is always square. Planes of colours are laid evenly, exactly abutted or contained within black or white boundaries. The planes are in most cases, though not always, locked together in horizontal-vertical relationship, but this grouping is often broken assertively by dynamic 45-degree diagonals. Overlapping of some planes implies shallow layers of space, although the emphasis seems always on the flatness of the support. There is no sense of bravura spontaneity but rather of finely pitched control. ... This calculated balance of coloured planes is achieved entirely by eye; there is no use of ratios such as the golden section, or of mathematical systems of ordering as employed by Swiss concrete artists such as Max Bill or Richard Lohse. Rather, Webb looks to the free colour orchestration of French and Russian artists.

“Colour has always been of major importance to her. As an undergraduate in the School of Fine Art at Newcastle University, she wrote her dissertation on the French painter **Robert Delaunay**. Shortly before the First War, he and his Russian wife Sonia had developed a language of pure colour in the face of the greys and browns of cubism. Webb headed her dissertation with the following statement by Pierre Francastel from his book on the Delaunays: ‘Colour alone gives the depth, meaning and movement of everything. Felt space which is the domain of the painter is essentially coloured’. And from the late 1960s she often visited Sonia in Paris, admiring the forms and colours of her fabric designs in particular. ...

“As an undergraduate at Newcastle she was aware of **Victor Pasmore’s** and **Richard Hamilton’s** revolutionary “basic course” for abstract artists, but she was not ready for it, rather spending time in the life-room. Later, the exercises developed for this course...became important for her. By the time she moved to a postgraduate course at Chelsea School of Art, in 1963, she was making abstract paintings, encouraged by Richard Smith, and when she moved to teach at Harrogate she had space in the school studio to produce larger abstract works. In 1966 she started teaching part time at Norwich School of Art, but lived in Streatham, South London. On becoming full-time at Norwich in 1973, she moved to East Anglia. In 1968 her parents had bought an isolated farmhouse in Suffolk, and in 1973 she converted an outbuilding there into a large, well-lit studio where she continues to work. The farm is surrounded by arable fields bordered by hedges and is approached by a long, straight drive that opens at a right angle from a Roman road. Her childhood ambition had been to farm and here in rural Suffolk she is able to ride, garden, keep animals and, above all, to paint in deep, dedicated seclusion.

“Studies are made in watercolour and collage of papers that she has pre-painted. In her oils, layers of colour are applied with the brush until the surface is evenly flat. Straight lines are achieved by masking with rectangular strips of paper. Everything is exactly proportioned by eye: the grids, the planes of colour, are adjusted so that they relate perfectly together. In October 1970 she stated, ‘I like making two or more colours work very hard together to make a lot of things happen. At the same time there are a great number of things I wish to avoid. One of the hardest is avoiding having a centre, or part of the picture that claims attention more than the rest. Rather I want the colour to set up a process of renewal where relationships change with the looking. First assumptions are confounded the longer the painting is contemplated and this is how I like to think of them, as objects for contemplation.’”

### **Asking questions**

What shapes can you see? Describe them.

How many squares?

Are they all the same size?

What colours can you see? Name the colours? Make up specific descriptions, eg: sky blue, sea green

What objects do they know/associate with these colours?

Which colours are cold/warm? Which colours blend together/fight each other?

What jumps out at you?

What moves away?

How are the shapes arranged? (overlapping, at angles, in spirals etc)

Can you see anything in the arrangement of the shapes? (Clouds, mazes, animals, faces...)

Ask for words to describe how shapes and colours are arranged – maze, vibrant, glowing, isolated, lost, hidden, vivid, spiral?

What do you think the artist was thinking about/looking at when she made this picture?

How do you think she made the picture? (Are the clean edges by hand or computer?)

### **Gallery activities**

Imagine you are one of the squares – how do you feel?

Place yourself in the square and feel the colour, shape, movement, mood...

Think of a sentence that describes you. Describe yourself to a partner. Can they guess which square you are?

Show the children a picture of the Baptistery of San Giovanni that the artist used as inspiration.

Can they see what she has seen? What connections is she making? She has produced a piece of abstract art, arranging colours, lines, shapes that she has seen in the buildings.

Discuss the fact that a painting doesn’t have to be “realistic” to describe what an artist has to say about their environment.

Take the children to another gallery with more “traditional” and “realistic” landscapes. Ask them to transform the parts and features of the picture into an arrangement of shapes and colours to create an abstract interpretation.

Things for them to think about: do you want people to know what they are looking at, or is it mood or a sense of place that you want to put over? Will you give the viewer clues? Will there be similar shapes and colours to the traditional landscape view?

## Developing lines of enquiry in the classroom

### *A Sense of Place*

Use the school locality to develop an abstract colour piece. Collect visual evidence of locality – photos, maps, brochures, paintings. Ask the children to work in groups and to make a collection of lines, shapes and colours that are characteristic of their place. Look for common shapes in buildings, patterns within them, arrangements of buildings, road patterns, dominant colours etc.

### *“Play” the painting*

Use the painting as a visual musical score. Which colours represent which instruments/sounds? Do different shapes/colours represent pitch/volume? Could spaces between shapes determine the length of notes?

### *Creative poetry*

Ask the children to brainstorm words associated with the shapes, colours and arrangements in the picture.

Imagine they are one of the squares - how do they feel? Eg: vibrant, glowing, hidden, lost, vivid, spiralling, isolated... [See gallery activity above]. Develop the words into free verse.

*Claustrophobic  
Stress builds up inside me  
Crowded  
Shapes tumbled up  
everywhere  
Spirals  
I feel like bursting  
Fierce angles  
Dull colours grey green  
Specks of hope and joy  
Darkness*

### *Shape and Space*

Measure the angles in the painting and extend the lines, rotate and transform the shapes. Use coloured paper squares to make different arrangements of shapes and colours within a white square. Give the children rules – eg: limit colours, overlap certain shapes...

### *Abstract Art*

Use large squares of coloured paper to create different arrangements of shapes and colours. Find other artworks where painters have similarly focused on or emphasised particular colours or shapes to describe what they find to be important in the environment, eg: Matisse, Paul Klee, Mondrian, Riley, Derain, Delaunay.

