

Imagining

Our imaginations will take us anywhere we can conceive of: into the past or the future, to places we have never been to and places that have never existed. The possibilities are infinite.

In the case of a museum object or painting, we can choose to visit the time when it was made, and imagine who made it and why. We can imagine the things that might have happened to it over the course of time, who owned it, what it meant to them, what scenes took place around it.



Figure of an Angel, about 1710
Museum no. A.6-1948

Imagined worlds

We do not have to stay with the object. We can use it as a starting point from which to begin a journey through a whole imagined world.

If it is a piece of representational art, such as a painting or sculpture, we can focus on the people, creatures and scenes that it depicts. We can imagine what is going on just beyond the edges of the picture. We can imagine what was happening just before, or just after, the frozen moment that we see.

Where there are human figures depicted, we can imagine their histories, their thoughts, their futures. But there is no reason why we should stop with the human. What is the habitat and life-cycle of the griffin? What sort of thoughts does an angel have?

Trust your imagination

Let your imagination run wild. Trust its powers of endless invention. Don't know what it's like to be an angel? Just ask yourself. You'll quickly find out.

You will find, too, if you trust it that your imagination has an instinct for completing patterns: patterns of imagery, or the patterns of a complicated plot in a story or a play.



Backgammon piece, 1150-1175
Museum no. 376-1871

Care and feeding

However, the human imagination does not work in an airless vacuum, or create out of emptiness. It needs to be fed material from which to begin working. The material it needs is diverse: poetry, fiction and drama, art and music, philosophy and science, natural scenes and townscapes. And people: their thoughts, feelings, experiences, interactions with each other.

A good writer is normally a people-watcher. Also someone who takes in details: especially the telling details that give so much away. It may be a fleeting expression on someone's face; it may be their style of haircut, or their unlikely taste in music.

Most of all, we feed the imagination by attending carefully to what we see and hear, smell, taste and feel. What the imagination does with all this input can easily be something else again. When we study the wings of a parrot, we may be learning about the structure of an angel's wings, or a griffin's.

Notebooks

Many writers carry notebooks in which they write down everything that occurs to them that might come in useful for their work. Here are some of the sorts of things that writers often note down:

- ideas for poems and/or stories
- images (similes and metaphors)
- descriptive notes
- evocative words
- observations on people's behaviour
- scraps of overheard conversation
- notes on characters
- detailed observations of objects, scenes, people, etc



'Florists basket' by Lulu Guinness, 1993
Museum no. T.128-1996

Research

Some writers prepare for work by doing a lot of research: historical, geographical, scientific, whatever they feel they need to know. Others are turned off by research and do little or none. It's up to you what you choose to do. Neither way is right or wrong. It depends on what best stimulates your imagination. In the end, the only thing that is important is the finished piece of writing.