

A Tea Party by Joseph Van Aken: painted around 1720

Welcome to this guide in which I'll be inviting you to look at this painting for a few minutes.

Let's begin with a general look. What words would come to mind first of all if you had to describe this scene? Intimate? Crowded? Dark? Elegant? Something else?

We're presented with a group of six people. They're almost lined up as if they're on a stage. They're in a smallish space, and some are indulging in a hot cup of tea.

Where are they? Would you say this is a domestic setting or some sort of tea shop? The biggest clue is in the man seated on the right who's dressed, to our eye, rather strangely. He's wearing a dressing gown and bandana. This was fashionable informal wear for men of the time in which to receive and entertain visitors. So we're safe to guess that this is his house.

What room are they in? Maybe a parlour or salon. Do you like the look of the room? How do you think it sounds to be in this room, with all the wood and very few fabrics to absorb sound? Would it be rather noisy and echo-y?

What time of day do you think it is? Look at the sky and also at the light on the people. The sky looks rather dreary, but the light on the faces of the people is somewhat brighter. What impression does this give? It could be that sunlight's shining in from another direction. Could it be morning? Or afternoon tea time? Here it could be useful to know more about the customs of the day.

We're used to tea being a traditional afternoon event, but in the early 18th century, tea drinking was unusual as compared to coffee. Tea parties were highly fashionable, and they were not necessarily an afternoon event. It wasn't until well into the 19th century that afternoon tea became the fashion. So we're left to guess what time of day this is, here in our painting.

Let's look at the people next. Who are they? We've guessed that we're in the home of the man sitting on the right hand side. Is he a wealthy man do you think? To our modern eye, his room could look a bit frugal. No carpet, not many ornaments. But again there's lots of clues. Look around the room and spot the valuable objects – a

painting, a statue, and right in the middle of the picture a shiny silver tea pot on a burner, standing on an ornate silver table. At this time in history, tea itself was rather expensive, so much so that historians tell us poorer people would actually buy second-hand tea leaves from the rich, and brew them up for lengthy periods to get a good cup of tea out of them. Tea parties themselves were considered elegant and modern, with fancy accoutrements – tea pots and tea tables – being de rigueur. So this little gathering is clearly a special event denoting wealth and social status.

With all these clues, we can guess that this is a gentleman's house, and he's pretty comfortably off. Who are the other people? Two women sit with him. Do you think they're guests or perhaps family members who live in the house with him? Could one be his wife?

Let's seek out more clues. The older woman is fairly heavily clothed with an enwrapping head and neck covering and some sort of over cape. This outfit could suggest that she's cold, or perhaps dressed in a modest manner suited to her more senior age, or maybe she's just come in from outdoors with her little dog that's seated on her lap.

Meanwhile the younger woman is fashionably rigged out in a blue dress pulled back to reveal a rich petticoat, and showing a low neckline that would suggest she isn't feeling the cold! Could there be some sort of courtship or matchmaking going on here? Is the older woman a mother, aunt or maybe chaperone to the younger woman, who's perhaps visiting an eligible bachelor for tea? But would a hopeful bachelor be dressed so informally? Perhaps we're seeing a husband and wife with their older guest or relative? What do you think?

Whilst we're on the subject of clothing, have you noticed that everyone in the picture has a different head covering? The young boy is the only person with an uncovered head of hair, whilst the others sport: an elegant ruffled cap, a wig, the long head wrap mentioned a moment ago, a bandana, and a servant's cap.

How many servants do you think there are in the room? Is everyone who's standing up a servant? Taking a look at each one, there's a young boy who's carrying some sort of pastries, which he's eyeing up rather hopefully; then there's a woman to the

right who's carrying a kettle, and standing ready to top up the tea pot; and finally a man in the middle who's pointing to a little teaspoon he's holding, as if giving a short lesson about it to the older woman. This teaspoon would have been used for measuring out the tea, so we can guess that he's also a servant, though rather smartly dressed and in a formal wig, which many men wore at this time. He seems to be confident in sharing his knowledge of the new, modern custom of tea drinking to the guests, so we might also consider that he's a senior servant of some type.

It's interesting that none of the three seated people are looking at each other, but each is looking towards one of the servants. What atmosphere does this suggest? Are they easy in each other's company and so don't need to talk, or do you think they're awkward and have nothing to say to each other? Look at the body language for clues. Do they look relaxed? Do they look like they're comfortable with this new fashion of taking tea, or are all three looking a little new to the custom?

Could the artist be subtly mocking their social pretensions? Look again at the older servant. Is he maybe showing off on behalf of his master? He's being quite forward in engaging a guest in conversation, pontificating on the subject of tea. The older lady defers to him, and meanwhile the young woman looks hesitantly towards the boy who seems to be chuckling over his dish of delicacies. I leave it for you to decide whether this is a satire on social manners.

This tea party is a small affair, but it's about to get bigger. Imagine that you, the viewer have just arrived at the tea party and you're about to step into the picture. Who would you be? Are you another guest, another family member, or another servant? Will you be offered a seat and a cup of tea, or will you be handing around a refreshment to the guests? As you stand here, what does the room smell of? What can you hear? Now, step into the picture and take your place at the party.

So we've come to the end of this activity, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this