

Visual Literacy:

Strategies for Reading Art

A painting is quite similar to a history essay: it has an introduction, an organization, an argument, and evidence. But this all happens without words. Everything is laid out visually. Since our generation lacks “visual literacy” (the ability to read these components in a painting or sculpture), we often think that art is subjective and impenetrable. But with the reading tools I share here, you will be able to read a painting just like you read an essay. Your job is to gain that literacy. I open here with three suggestions as you approach art. Then I give you the six components that enable a viewer to “read” a visual work.

Slow down. Asking all of the necessary questions of a piece of art takes time. Recognize that doing a full reading of a single piece takes at least a half hour. You will need to give brief readings (5 minutes) to multiple pieces, and may choose to give a full reading to the one you like the most.

Ask why. This means that as you go through the following checklist of basic pillars of a piece of artwork, you hear the constant voice of a two year nephew ringing in your ear: *why? what does that mean?* Ask the questions and then venture an guess even when you really do not know. The very best artists have a very high intentionality. That means that if you had a chance to get coffee with them (assuming they were still alive), they could explain the “why” behind the choices they made.

(Mis)read - Venturing your own meaning of a work of art, even when wrong, is called “misreading.” We generally feel scared or uneasy about being wrong. But being wrong is part of the learning process. It helps us learn! As young scholars, we are like students learning a second language. If we are too afraid to speak, we will never learn! We have to open our mouths and explain our ideas, bad grammar and all, if we aspire to someday speak fluently. Only after many flawed conversations will our ideas begin to take shape. Courageous language learners make big mistakes and then learn from them. Often, it is the recognition of a big mistake that serves as the key to understanding a larger cultural difference.

So we must practice our own interpretations of the artwork we view. Trying to sustain an argument about a piece will force us to work through the piece all the more closely. With time, we will more quickly find the objects in the painting that act like clues, holding the key to larger messages embedded within the piece. Do that and soon you yourself will be making strikingly original interpretations of art.

Now here are the components of the reading process:

1. Narrative Content.

We live in a world filled with television and movies. This means we are used to seeing stories played out as moving images that develop over some 90 minutes. But before the 20th century, before moving pictures existed, artists worked hard to tell a story on just a single canvas, as if the painting was a “still” taken from a larger film. So part of “reading” a canvas is identifying its narrative. Your job is to figure out if this is the beginning, middle, or end of the movie and then use the objects included in the composition to identify the storyline.

Most of the time, especially as a beginner, you might have nothing more than a guess as to the story. You will be afraid to guess because you might be totally wrong. Guess anyway. A good guess, even when wrong, is still valuable. Such ‘misreadings’ can sometimes teach us more than a right answer! If you do not have a guess, then look at the date of the painting. Then try to make connections to historic events and time periods.

2. Historic Context

As you examine the piece, begin making connections with a historic time period and, if possible, a specific event. Some pieces have obvious historic context. Jacob Lawrence’s visual art of the Great Migration is appropriately called “The Migration Series” and depicts violence in the deep South and the thousands of African-Americans that boarded trains for northern cities. Other paintings cannot be pinned down to a certain event, but they can be tied to a place or an era. In Johannes Vermeer’s *The Astronomer*, for instance, we might not recognize the man or the year, but we can tell from the globe and the books on the table that this is a painting set during the general historic period called the Enlightenment, and that it tells the story of an Astronomer fascinated by his research projects and enthralled with the learning process.

Once we know the basic historic period, it is time for us to begin making connections with what we know about the period. Start answering the W questions: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. What background knowledge do we have on the Great Migration? What people living during the Enlightenment have written works that we have read? Is there anything in those works that might help us better understand the narrative?

Sometimes artists are dialoguing with writers. In those cases, we could guess at a specific book that the artist was thinking of and make a comparison. But that is less common. More common is that we, as scholars, make our own connections. This is great! Look back at your own written primary sources and try to sustain a connection between the writing and the painting. How do the two interact? Are there any experiences that these two individuals had in common? Any ideas of theirs that align? That challenge each other? If and when you are writing or speaking about these connections, use quotes to strengthen your argument.

3. Symbolic Content

What subjects and objects are in the piece? How are they represented? Every single object in a painting is meant to be taken literally or symbolically. If you want to identify the symbolic objects in the painting, ask yourself these questions: Does this item

in the picture look *natural*? Is it *necessary*? If the answer to either question is “no,” then you are dealing with a symbolic object.

This test is easiest to apply with colors. If the sun is blue instead of yellow, you know there is some symbolism present. If people are painted purple instead of skin-tone colors, then there is a reason. Colors have meanings and they set moods. Ask yourself what those meanings and moods are. The same applies with all objects and settings in a painting: is there a non-domestic animal in the house? Probably a symbol. Is the setting a giant waterfall? Ask yourself what it could mean. Mythologist Joseph Campbell reminds us that settings that are in outer space or even in an imaginary space are usually a way of communicating spaces within us (emotions, inner turmoil). Keep these in mind as you read symbols.

Remember that all art is a *re-presentation* of the world; it presents the world to you all over again. By doing that, the artist is either trying to strengthen your pre-existing view of the world, or they are trying to challenge how you see it. Unexpected figures and spaces are an invitation (or sometimes a slap in the face) for you to see the world anew. So what do you see?

4. *Form* - Is this a triptych (a three-piece fold-out panel painting)? A sculpture? An installation? Each piece of art comes in a certain form, and that form intrudes on the message of the piece itself. Great artists put a great deal of thought which form would best convey the message of the piece. One Brazilian artist named Hélio Oiticica created the parangolê dresses--actually intended to be worn!--so that the art could be passed back into the street. Another Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark, created the "bichos" (critters) series, objects meant to be touched by everyone that passes through the museum so that the sense of touch could be activated alongside the sense of sight.

5. *Medium* - Artists change mediums in order to better tell their stories. Recently, installation artist Ai Weiwei was willing to turn to porcelain--and enroll the help of thousands of factory workers--in order to tell a story about production, individualism, and modernity. If an artist is using metal, clay, or fabric, then ask why. How does that material help tell a larger story?

6. *Composition*.

Graphic designers today call this “Page layout.” Back in the day of easel and canvas, they called it composition: where do you put each object on the canvas? Everything holds its place for a reason. In Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, there is a reason the painter appears bigger than the king and queen in the mirror; in the 1946 *America del Sur*, artist Joaquín Torres García is making a specific point by inverting the shape of South America. Your job is to locate the place of each subject and object in the painting and ask, “why right here, and not over there?”

Composition also includes the visual movement of the piece. In books, we always read left to right, and from the top of the page to the bottom. Artists know this, but sometimes invite us to read a visual story from right to left, from bottom to top, or even from shallow to deep. Try to figure out the visual movement of the piece. One way to do this is to close your eyes for ten seconds, and then open them slowly and follow the natural movement of your eyes. They will usually focus on the brightest color or some

“focal point” and then move to secondary and tertiary focal points naturally. Follow this. Another way to tell is to look at the direction of the brush strokes in the painting.

Why do we care about visual movement? Because this contributes to the artist’s narrative and larger thesis. When you become an expert “reader” of paintings, you will recognize actual lines and geometric shapes of this visual movement. The artist uses these primarily to help you understand the direction of the story (in a similar way to the placement of speech bubbles in comic strips). But these lines can also have symbolic meanings. The famous artist *Hieronymous Bosch*, for example, used diagonal lines to teach about virtue (high on the canvas and thus symbolic of being close to God) and vice (low to the ground, and symbolic of distance from God).