



*Visual Understanding in Education*  
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## **Guidelines for Image Selection for Beginning Viewers**

by VUE staff

Choosing objects to introduce beginning viewers to the wonders of art should be as thoughtful a process as choosing literature to engage the incipient reader. If the educator places a value on the viewer's developing a solid rapport with art, based on direct, personal connection, then thinking about what art is appropriate for them makes sense.

The following guidelines are meant to aid the selection of images that lead to productive teaching for beginning viewers, whether thinking about the objects included in a museum visit or as part of materials prepared for classroom teaching. They are based on the premise that aesthetic learning occurs when the viewing experience addresses the needs and concerns of viewers, and appropriately challenges their abilities. The recommendations draw on Abigail Housen's research into the viewing process and on her Stages of Aesthetic Development. The information she has derived from studying viewers' thinking enables us to link image choices to beginning viewers' interests, strengths, and areas of potential for growth.

One challenging aspect of choosing art for beginning viewers is realizing that not all art is the same, that not all objects are equally interesting to all viewers, and equally accessible in terms of meaning. In truth, objects lumped together as art are enormously diverse in content, intention, style, materials, and so forth. What is easily readable in one culture is obtuse in another. Some art is dense with information, multilayered, and/or symbol-laden, other is patently decorative; understanding much of it demands certain prerequisite knowledge. Some art is emotionally expressive, some narrative and/or naturalistic; other is abstract, iconographic, stylized or idealized--in each case for different reasons, and most of it begging certain literacies for accurate "decoding". The meaning and even the purposes of much art is speculative and subject to reasonable interpretation only by those who have studied it for years. Much art, including religious objects as well as some recent art, was intended for an audience that specific shared information and attitudes, and remains truly available only to those who gain that knowledge.

One assumption of this guide is that early viewing is best taught by activating learners--helping them look carefully, think about what they see, and articulate their responses to it. We feel that this is most productively done in the context of discussions among groups of peers--people with equal experience and exposure to art, who therefore speak the same language, as it were. In discussions aided by a facilitator, individuals can overcome their own limitations by sharing observations and insights with others. A group of people brings a breadth of information and experience to the process, even if it is not experience with art. Importantly, the synergy of people adding to each other's observations and bouncing ideas off one another enables a "group mind" to find possible, plausible meanings in unfamiliar images much more productively than any individual alone could do. Through group process, the individual's possibilities are enhanced significantly.

### **Accessibility**

Beginning viewers make sense of what they encounter based on what they already know, thus one essential requirement for art images introduced to them is accessibility: are they likely to recognize what they observe? Can they make reasonable associations with it based on what they already know? Pictures should thus include identifiable and reasonably familiar people, actions, interactions, settings, and emotions. Viewers should be able to glean what they can from the objects without expert intervention, learning to trust that most art can be interpreted to a meaningful degree through examination, association, and deduction. What assists the beginning viewer is the sense that they are "getting it right." Puzzling them is useful, but stumping them is not.

### **Expressive content**

The images selected must be open to interpretation: they should contain a number of valid readings, and several possible meanings, even levels of meaning. This allows an intriguing challenge, and it also justifies a range of viable view points, recognizing that a characteristic beginning viewer behavior is ideosyncrasy and personal reading. The more a work is open to interpretation, the more likely the viewer's intuition is reasonable. At the beginning, images that are quickly captivating, and clear enough given a surface reading, are acceptable; but quickly, as confidence builds and interest in probing increases, pictures that are less clear are appropriate, functioning to encourage speculation, questioning, and complex interpretations.

### **Narrative**

Housen has found that beginning viewers look for stories in art, even when they are not there. Our selection should give them ample opportunity to exercise this instinct and skill by providing images in which the artist intended a story to be found. Look for stopped action, dialogues, and pregnant moments, often found in "genre" scenes and images of family, play and work. Having "human interest" may be a way of describing the sought-after factors. Familiarity with the story's elements is an issue here, so that viewers read the intended story, rather than one created entirely of their own fancy. It is important for beginning viewers to conclude a discussion thinking that they had legitimate insights; the older the group, the more likely they are to be suspicious of a process where many answers are correct; they are accustomed to a pattern of defined right and wrong, and it is therefore helpful at the end of a discussion (in the event that the question comes up) for the teacher to be able to say, yes, you did understand this picture in the way the artist wanted you to--or at least that the artist would be likely to accept the interpretations given. This is where a knowledge of art history and criticism is very useful: making selections with the artist's or culture's intentions in mind.

## **Diversity**

It is very much to the point to include art that is diverse in time and culture, in part because it is important for the beginning viewer to have experience at finding meaning in a wide range of art, even if they are little aware of it. Nevertheless, as you select, you must again consider each work's relevance to particular viewers. Are they likely to be able to identify and accurately understand key elements, based on their shared experiences? A good rule of thumb is that more than half of the content should be accurately "decodable" ("gotten right")--given, of course, careful attention and thoughtful discussion. Many Japanese prints, Persian art and Medieval secular art qualify, for examples. Overall diversity should be sensitive to gender and racial representation as well as geography, ethnicity and the span of history.

There are many good reasons for selecting images diverse in time and place:

- diversity increases appreciation both for subjects and values that are specific to one culture as well as those that run through many;
- history can be made concrete through art, something that gains in importance over time;
- variety allows for more people to find their interests and preferences represented;
- unfamiliar art can indicate that there are people and places who see things their own way, perhaps quite differently from you.

## **Realism**

Stylistically, most of the varied forms of realism--from naturalism and romanticism to expressionism and various forms of stylization and idealization--will be most useful. In the case of photorealism, it depends on how interesting and relevant the subject is. Surrealism can be appreciated, especially after some earlier experience with images whose logic corresponds to the "real world."

## **Series/themes**

Generally, images should be presented in series, united by some visual elements or themes. For beginner viewers, this suggests an obvious link, such as mothers and children, people playing or working, not an underlying subtlety such as joy. It is not, however, assumed that beginner viewers will notice such interconnections. Still, given the existence of much continuity and transcendence in themes, ideas, subjects and values in art throughout time and cultures, it is useful to structure this concept into any organized presentation of art.

## **Media**

Paintings, drawings, prints, photographs and sculpture (including reliefs) are all good choices for museum visits, although scale, glare and accessibility should be considered. You want to ensure that all participants can easily see the work under discussion.

When making a selection of images to be discussed by way of slides or other reproductions, three-dimensional work should be downplayed including most decorative arts, architecture and site-specific sculpture, mostly because these do not translate well to reproduction, especially given the literal-ness of beginner viewers. The exceptions to this include reliefs and other sculptures that read well from one view.

Paintings are useful because

- they are ubiquitous through history and often thought of as the most important artistic medium of a culture;
- they communicate by several means, including both subject and appearance;
- they reproduce reasonably accurately.

Some drawings and prints should be included because

- students should become familiar with these important media;
- students own work is most likely to be in these media;
- these media illustrate artists' technical processes most visibly.

Photographs should be included because

- one cannot become a visually literate person today without learning to interpret photos; we see great numbers of them, mostly without considering the ways they are used to manipulate our responses;
- they are often easy to read which makes them especially accessible to beginning viewers;
- they are also very important as a bridge to understanding what artist's do. Of all media, photographic processes are the easiest for the student to emulate; they can imagine looking through a camera, shifting position to include more or less in an image, or to show it from an unusual position. Through this, it is easy to begin thinking about what choices artists make in terms of subjects and presentation, what they might be intending for us to think because of these choices, and so forth. Moreover, they can themselves take pictures that look as they want them to, harder with drawing and painting.

### **Artistic genre**

Various categories of art (land-, sea- and town/city-scapes, portraiture/self portraits) should each be given some attention, although "genre" scenes will dominate for beginner viewers. It is not assumed that viewers will acknowledge or even appreciate this diversity. However, if they are continuously being exposed to a range of information, the groundwork will be there for conscious awareness and appreciation later.

### **Key artists and works**

Artists in whom some collective pride is taken should be represented, as well as works that are particularly well known. Decisions of this kind are not particularly important to the viewer, but they help legitimize this approach to teaching to those more familiar with art than with the needs of beginning viewers--and they also help the student in learning the canons of art history if and when s/he becomes interested in doing so.

### **Sequences**

Once a selection is made, putting the images in a sequence leading from ones that are simpler (where there are clearer and fewer possible meanings, fewer details, less density of content) and working toward more complex ones (where there is greater ambiguity of meaning, where ferreting out signifying details is more time consuming, where more of the meaning is communicated through style and materials than through iconography or subject, where symbolism and metaphor are more important). The number of images depends on the age and experience of the group, as well as its size, but considering that a good discussion takes from 12 to 20 minutes for a group of 20-25, somewhere between three and five images is a good number to plan for a single lesson, in a museum or out.

### **Some thoughts on what might be avoided**

At beginner levels, it is important to avoid introducing art work that requires specialized information in order to find meanings intended by the artist or culture. If a group cannot come up with a reasonably accurate interpretation of an object--as in the case of a symbol-laden representation of the Hindu god Siva, perhaps--then wait to introduce it. There will come a point when seeking information is itself an intriguing pursuit. Historical, religious and mythological subjects, and ethnic-specific should be avoided because of their specificity: there are "correct answers," and misinterpretations can be misleading and intellectually specious. But again, there are many cases where the art object tells a story that makes sense even if certain particulars are not surmised or understood in detail. A single African ancestor figure may be inscrutable, but an African mother and child may communicate clearly its meaning, and even its magic.

Illustrations, most photojournalism, cartoons and advertisements are seldom productive as images for beginning viewers because they allow for only one, or at best a narrow range, of interpretations.

In general, certain subjects should be avoided, not because they are unimportant nor because under some circumstances they might not be discussed

productively by beginning viewers, but because school and other public situations involve too many variables to insure a positive experience. Images depicting violence, specific political stances, specific religious imagery, nudity, overt sexuality and sensuality, and grotesque or macabre subjects may cause teachers difficulty because the values expressed are in conflict with a child's--or his or her own. The point of initial forays into art is not to challenge deeply-held views nor to force conversation about taboo subjects, but to encourage looking, thinking and the articulation of well-founded opinions. Highly charged subjects, topics or even challenging techniques divert viewers from this focus.

Abstractions are discouraged for beginner viewers not because they dislike them, but because they continue to look for stories in them--often idiosyncratic and imaginative fantasies--where none are suggested by the artist. Even for adult viewers, early experiences with art remain within the realm of the concrete and the obvious; thinking abstractly is an adult behavior, and also a sophisticated one that must be led up to.

Still lives are not encouraged because the qualities one appreciates in a still life, like the qualities of an abstract painting, are not the ones that beginners are drawn to explore.

Most decorative arts and architecture are difficult for beginner viewers to appreciate because so much of their meaning has to do with either abstract issues (status, power, wealth, space) or with the use of materials and crafts which are not the concerns of beginners. They will come to them in time.

### **Specific considerations for younger viewers**

Very young viewers (5-7 year olds) are usually satisfied with finding, naming, listing, counting, scouting out more--and to some extent making up stories about what they see. Overall, the pictures should be fairly obvious and simple to allow for students to discuss them insightfully in terms of concrete observations--which is the arena in which they operate. They are not naturally inclined toward reasoning, seeking out levels of meaning, or pulling back and reflecting. Select accordingly. They should be able to interpret images accurately through a process of identifying what they see, including actions, gestures, expressions.

When selecting for classroom materials, include at least one or two works that can be revisited during the museum visits.

### Imagery

- Active and animated, rather than quiet and pensive
- Fairly spare in terms of how much is depicted
- People and animals, more than things
- Having one person or small groups, especially children, families
- Equal gender representation, as well as racial/ethnic
- Familiar activities
- Familiar emotions
- Values depicted should be shared by students
- Clear settings
- Timelessness
- Colorful, cheerful and positive images will make teachers happy, and might well be recommended for the children as well

### Technique

- Reasonably naturalistic realism
- Paintings, drawings (especially in media children use themselves), photographs, folk art

### Diversity

- Prioritize close to home, working outward: 25% might be "other"
- Art works from other cultures should be highly similar in appearance to the "local" ones
- Reasonable possibilities include Egyptian, various Asian, Islamic

### Themes

- Family, parent(s) and child
- Play, work, school
- Love
- Day/night
- Seasons
- City/town/country/water

### **For the slightly more experienced, slightly older**

If they have very little experience with viewing art, most of what was said above still applies. There should be some differences to accommodate growth or age, however. For example, given experience with the VTS, they likely have a strategy for looking and will use it: they are likely to give detailed observations, will listen to other's points of view, and will explain their answers as a matter of course. They will not be content with listing what is concretely before them, but will be filled with stories.

Answering the question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" will have given students experience at thinking about their own thoughts--even if they are not conscious of this. This capacity may help prepare them for having second thoughts. They are likely to incorporate interpretations offered by their classmates into their own thinking. In any case, there is justification for selecting images that are more complicated, perhaps slightly more ambiguous, but that still can be "decoded" from the group looking together seriously and

searchingly. Some surrealist paintings are suitable--as in Dali, and possibly Magritte where the technique admirably represents the physical world, but the subjects push the imagination.

There may be some paradoxical behavior. On the one hand, students' experience looking may allow them to enjoy pictures with imaginative elements; they will try to penetrate the picture's world. On the other, one may hear comments that compare an image to a student's concept of reality, as well as to the reality they perceive in most photographs--comparisons between what is depicted in an image and a student's concept of how it should be. This is inevitable, and might be played with in terms of picture selection.

While it is early to push the task of comparing and contrasting, it is wise to include good comparisons in the selection to allow for it to happen naturally.

For classroom materials, include a number of pictures that can be seen in museums and others that were seen earlier.

### Imagery

- See above re: younger children; most of this still applies
- Slightly increase the density of information--details which contribute to the story and may complicate it
- Increase the number of possible readings, ambiguity, also very slightly
- Introduce some fantasy and surrealistic elements
- Stay within the realm of the familiar in all cases
- Social and family issues can be useful, although teachers sometimes become upset if too much "reality" enters the classroom
- Avoid any images that might lead to invoking of stereotypes
- Avoid subjects that get too much play in the popular media, like violence
- Represent both genders and their interests conscientiously
- Emphasize images where the character and personality of people comes richly into play, as well as complex settings, and begin to introduce issues that have to do with time: of day, of year not so much era

### Technique

- All media that are generally recommended, especially photography
- Realism still useful, including expressionism, surrealism, stylization

### Diversity

- A wide range of art from many cultures and times
- Representation of all racial and ethnic groups, being especially sensitive to the mix within the targeted audience

### Themes

- More likely to be noticed, helpful
- Comparisons and contrasts helpful

### **After several years of significant experience**

A switch in cognitive operations should be noticeable, making it likely that viewers are less content with subjectivity and personal readings. They may be more concerned about rules--what makes things appear as they do--perhaps expressing this in the form of questions. Some issues that come up for them concern techniques and logic: things should appear as they are "supposed" to be. Viewers may be more conservative in their tastes than they were at the beginning; the so-called openness of beginners is actually a matter of ignorance (bliss...); after some experience, personal tastes, attitudes and values come into play. We should respect this if we want to keep them searching for meaning in new ways, instead of sidetracking them into arguments about what is right or wrong with a style, technique or subject. Values are likely to be of real concern, so this is not the time to challenge their moral or ethical views, as they might lose interest in art, and therefore the process we have been teaching.

Two specific issues are predictable: craftsmanship, and who the artist might be. This is a good time to concentrate on images that address what the artist was either feeling or thinking. Regarding the latter, self portraits are recommended; it might be useful to have groups of pictures by single artists, to allow them to look more deeply into an individual's way of working, choice-making, concerns. Regarding the former, photographs are useful, given the viewer's familiarity with cameras, and his/her capacity to figure out many aspects of how they were made. Staying within the framework of realist tradition, it will nevertheless be useful to push the boundaries a little technically, too.

### Imagery

- Less active, more pensive, more interior content
- Sparseness and focus still likely to be helpful in terms of information (less to look at but more to think about than preceding year)
- Paradox: general cultural statements useful (eg Robert Frank) also intensely personal comments (eg Kollwitz, Kahlo)
- Familiarity still important
- Obvious symbols--like skulls or flags--useful
- Shared values critically important
- Add "era" to the pictures in which time is a major concern, less timelessness
- Sequences by one artist

### Technique

- Realism; avoid "weird" techniques unless making a point
- Photography, indicating variety of viewpoints and distances from subject, poses vs. candid, framing
- Sequences needed showing divergent styles, craft

### Diversity, culturally

- As above
- Comparisons of different expressions of similar beliefs useful

### Themes

- Very useful at this juncture, especially pairs that can be compared and contrasted