

VTS Visual Thinking Strategies™

Thoughts on Visual Literacy

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Originally published in Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy through the Communicative and Visual Arts.

Visual literacy is the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification--naming what one sees--to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. Objective understanding is the premise of much of this literacy, but subjective and affective aspects of knowing are equally important. Visual literacy usually begins to develop as a viewer finds his/her own relative understanding of what s/he confronts, usually based on concrete and circumstantial evidence. It eventually involves considering the intentions of the maker, applying systems for thinking and rethinking one's opinions, and acquiring a body of information to support conclusions and judgments. The expert will also express these understandings in a specialized vocabulary.

Different skills are called upon to construct meaning from the huge variety of images in contemporary culture: a straightforward news photo will require fewer, simpler operations than a psychologically-manipulative ad; an illustration will engage the viewer differently from abstract painting; a kitchen chair differently from a 19th-century farm implement; a street sign from a road map; a snapshot from television; a building model from a diagram or plan, and so on. Some images ask to be understood at face value. Others have greater built-in complexity, including the possibility of symbolic, implied, and mysterious meanings. Presumably, the visually literate person can comprehend on various levels whatever he or she chooses.

There are degrees of visual literacy, however. For example, a young person can construct meaning from both simple (e.g., comics) and complex (e.g., art objects) visual materials. An older person, having greater experience and breadth of thinking skills in general, may glean more possibilities from the same images--for example, symbols or implications. An art historian will have acquired a factual base and competence at schemes of visual analysis and can additionally place a work in time and categories by technique, style, and iconography.

The literalness and constant presence of some types of imagery builds a certain perceptual and mental development in most people, but it is incorrect to assume that we learn to negotiate meaning in imagery simply by exposure. Increased capacities require both time and broad exposure as well as educational interventions of various sorts. For example, by studying the way people respond to art, we see that beginning viewers apply what they have learned from constant exposure to television, newspapers, magazines and books to art, but this preparation only allows them to deal easily with images that follow well-known conventions or are narrative in a traditional sense, not unpredictable ones nor those in which the story is hard to figure out.

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There is no instruction in visual literacy either in schools or out, nor even recognition that learning to look is, like reading, a process of stages. There is no accepted system by which to teach it either--that is, strategies sequenced to address the needs and abilities of an individual at a given moment, strategies that eventually allow one to come to terms with complex images.

It is useful to refer to reading to help illuminate what is missing in visual arts instruction that would help build visual literacy. For example, we still need to understand the long period comparable to "reading readiness" that predates skillful construction of meaning from images. We need to find the turning point which might be called "functional literacy." We need to assess the equivalent of "reading for comprehension" and to be able to describe other observable, measurable stages or phenomena, at least for professionals in the field. Reading levels are understood as gradual and slowly evolving, allowing for large and small developmental changes in skills, understanding, and involvement. Visual literacy should be seen as a similarly slow-developing set of skills and understandings that progress unevenly, each step building on earlier ones, each dependent on certain kinds of exposure and instruction.

The concern for the development of visual literacy comes from two main sources--museum educators who daily face audiences admittedly limited in their ability to find meaning in works of art, and others who witness with alarm the uncritical nature of the public-at-large regarding media. My own use of the term began around 1970 because of facing the realities of young people when looking at art as the head of programs for high school students at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Usually relying on art history, various analytical strategies, and many sorts of hands on activities, my colleagues across the country and I have experimented over the last three decades with devices and content intended to advance viewer's aesthetic understandings to the point where complex visual structures are meaningful and pleasurable, but with little evidence of success.

There is reason to expect progress at this point, however, because of the research and theories of Abigail Housen, the most reliable source of data concerning aesthetic development. For almost twenty years, Housen has conducted and reviewed thousands of open-ended interviews regarding works of art, studying these responses from both a statistical and clinical basis. She has field-tested measurement tools and refined a system of drawing conclusions, as well as seen what and how interventions affect change. From this she has developed a very robust theory, applying to the spectrum of experience with regard to art. Her conclusions are empirical, and given that her theory makes no assumptions except its commitment to the overall notion of cognitive development as a process involving time and exposure, it reliably supports the creation and measurement of actual teaching strategies.

One of the things that she tells us is that individuals at each of five stages of aesthetic development can have a strong connection to art just as people have strong connections to literature regardless of how well they read personally. During Housen's Stage I and much of II, people might be called "pre-literate."

At the earliest stage, viewers' strength can be characterized as storytelling--that is, relating what they see to what they know by strings of personal anecdotal responses. They see things through their own life experiences--and not through a framework of aesthetic associations as experts do. Teaching effectively to this stage involves presenting the viewer with works that encourage a narrative reading, and relate to familiar contexts and activities. Ask them to look and think about what they see, then to look again, and to share and compare their perceptions

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and responses with others. This viewer can quickly learn to observe more and ground their stories in evidence within the picture rather than simply in their memories or imaginations. This capacity itself represents growth, essential for moving to later stages.

At Stage II, people begin to distrust their own judgment; if they see something they think is "weird," they don't believe the answers to "why" are within them. If the work in question is in a museum, it dawns on them that others recognize some value they do not perceive; they often want an explanation of that value, but, even more, they want to be able to make more informed, less subjective judgments on their own. This is an immensely "educable" stage. They have developed a curiosity and drive that will help make information stick in their memories. At this point, they can add strategies, comparing and contrasting, for example, or breaking down what they see to determine how colors or materials contribute to meaning. They can be taught to ferret out the decisions an artist--choices artists make in choosing subjects, for example, or ways of creating space.

By the end of the long course of Stage II, people have developed basic skills, learned essential concepts, and have a small information base. They can comprehend much of what they encounter in art--albeit at a simple level, still mostly on their own terms--but they are equipped to pursue further study if they so choose. They can select what art interests them and decide to develop their interest beyond merely "functioning;" in reading terms again, this might be called "functional literacy."

Housen's stages III, IV, and V (and the transition stages she has also described) are ones in which visual literacy is in place. In Stage III, the goals are to acquire and retain information about art and to classify it according to the systems of art historical scholarship. Appropriate instruction exists to address the needs and interests of Stage III viewers: the teaching of art history and criticism as well as varied programs teaching studio practices. The final stages--attained by having made art one's major focus in life, usually one's profession--require no intervention from "educators." Further learning is ongoing and self guided.

In order to advance in aesthetic understandings and the set of skills which broaden them--visual literacy--viewers need long term, graduated support, like that provided to readers. Instruction for the early stages particularly needs attention. But, given experimentation based on Housen's work, there is evidence that learning to interpret and discuss works of art promotes thinking critically and creatively as well. It is also likely that developing this literacy can enhance the development of other meaning making systems. We can hope that there is, at the very least, more experimental work in this area in the near future.

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For more on Abigail Housen's research and theories see:

Housen, Abigail. "Three Methods for Understanding Museum Audiences." *Museum Studies Journal*, Spring-Summer 1987.

Housen, Abigail. "Validating a Measure of Aesthetic Development for Museums and Schools." *ILVS Review, A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, Vol.2, No.2, 1992.