VISUAL LITERACY

Have you ever heard, "I know what I like, but I don't need to know the reason why." or "Either a picture turns me on or it doesn't; there's no reason why, it just happens." Such feelings are often expressed when people are asked to explain their reactions to a visual statement. Are such responses reflections of lazy thinking and viewing? Or is there such a thing as artistic illiteracy?

Creative people need to express feelings and thoughts. A writer puts words on paper; a composer speaks to us with music; an artist uses paints, inks, clay as media for creative energy. Art is a means of communication.

Art appreciation requires skills in observing, describing and recognizing aesthetic qualities, being able to see and read visual "language". Learning to appreciate art is learning to be sensitively aware of an artist's message, understanding the art elements of line, shape, color and how they relate to each other.

Visual literacy is different from verbal literacy. It is a unique mode of expression. The following material will serve as an introduction to thinking about, looking at, discussing and enjoying the visual language of our world.

MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH ART

All of us have had the experience of being unsure of what we think about a work of art, or unsure of how to put what we do think into words. Works of art that are unusual, whether abstract or representational, present problems to anyone who sees them for the first time. Our familiar guidelines may suddenly seem irrelevant. What's going on here, we ask. Can I understand it? Can it mean anything to me?

When you look at a work of art, allow yourself time. Make yourself stay there. Give yourself ten minutes. Get comfortable, and just look at it. Don't look for anything in particular. Don't try to think. It may seem a little crazy, but if you do this, things will start to pop out at you. You will find yourself seeing more and more.

To build further upon the experience, talk about what you see. Toss around your thoughts and ideas with other people. Don't hesitate to ask questions about what you see. What do you notice? Why? What seems unusual?

Talking and also writing about what you see helps you to discover and to refine your thoughts. In discussing a piece, try not to rely on other people's words and phrases. However, in time, you may come to need terms that art critics use. The terminology of art critics and historians can serve as a useful tool to help you to see more clearly and to communicate more accurately. Like any tool, however, it should be used properly.
If you think something you see is good, it's not enough for you to say so and let it go at that. Deciding whether it's good or not could conceivably be an end point in a discussion. More

interesting, and certainly of more use to you and the others you are speaking to, is to know *why* you think it's good. Your interest ought to be placed in what's going on in it, in what you've discovered, rather than in whether you label it good or not.

Often the very first word that comes into your mind carries the greatest significance for you. Trust it. Don't worry about what somebody else would say. For no matter how far-fetched it may seem, it carries with it the truth of your experience. THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A WRONG REACTION TO ART.

One word of caution: when you talk or write about a work of art, *look* at it carefully. Make sure there is a basis in the work itself for what you are saying. Bouncing your pet theories off a painting may be fun, but you risk missing out on what the painter is trying to tell you.

Certainly, reading about the piece, its social background, or about the artist can illuminate it for you and provide a foundation for a better understanding of it. There are times when no amount of guesswork can disclose the meaning of a piece, and only a history book or an anthropological study can provide the keys to understanding.

But it's impossible for anyone to know *all* there is to know about a work of art. Meanings in art just don't stay put. Over time, old associations may be lost. Perspectives change, new meanings are discovered, theories and opinions are revised. Meanings, in art at least, are multiple and always open to discussion.

Works of art speak to us through images, not words. So we will want to ask: What did the artist do to make me see, feel, and understand? How does the organization of the piece communicate its meanings? How does the technique shape our reactions?

Your investigation of a work of art will often reveal many aspects and many levels of meaning. The more of these you discover, the stronger your connection to it will be. Like the human personality, a work of art has depth and can hold many surprises.

The contemplation of art is a way of contemplating life, for all of life finds expression in art. That is why the contemplation of art is limitless, and also why it is rewarding.

VISUAL ELEMENTS

For many people, the first and most lasting response to a work of art may be to its subject matter, But that is not all there is to it. Enjoying the subject matter does not necessarily mean appreciating the art. In order to get the most out of a work of art, we would have to look at it in a different way.

Simply thinking of a painting as a mechanical reproduction, imagining that the artist is merely a good eye and an expert hand, limits our grasp of it. In order to appreciate a painting you need to ask certain questions about it, questions that can reveal how *unlike* its probable model or

subject it is. These questions can direct you to the choices the artist made when creating the work, and can help you to see why those choices were made.

Color

When you are viewing a painting look at the visual elements: color, light, texture, volume, shape, line, composition. Isolate each one in turn. With color, for example, ask yourself:

- Are the colors light or dark?
- Bright and intense or dull and grayed?
- Bluish or orangey?
- Are they pastel?
- Do they contrast highly with each other or are they closely related?
- Do they have sharp, clear edges? Rough edges? Soft edges?
- Do they merge into each other? Do they overlap one another or do they blend?
- Are the colors opaque or transparent?
- Are they glossy or matte?
- How are they distributed? Which colors are grouped together?
- Which colors draw attention to themselves?
- Which colors seem to move toward you?
- Which colors seem to recede?

We tend to think of color in term of hue, such as red, green, or blue. But color is more than that. Painters rarely use colors as they come out of the tube, preferring instead to mix them to create distinctive colors and to adjust them carefully to each other. In a good painting, colors are orchestrated so that the effect of all the colors together will be more striking than individual colors here and there.

Light

Color affects the character of the light in a painting. Because light is impalpable, as well as inevitable, it is often overlooked. Yet its role, however subtle, is likely to be an important one. Ask yourself:

- Is the light bright or dim?
- Is it even or contrasting?
- Is it direct or reflected, or a combination of these?
- Does the light sparkle, shine, or glow?
- Can you tell its color?
- How is it used?
- Does it direct your attention to something?
- Does it suppress something?

Texture

The texture of a painting is determined by the kind of paint used and how it is applied. Ask yourself:

- Does the paint look thick or thin?
- Is it rough or smooth?

- Dense or watery?
- Now look at the brushstrokes that are used to define the objects that you see. Are the objects sharp and clear or soft and indistinct?
- Do the brushstrokes simplify the objects or show things in exacting detail?
- Are the objects loosely painted or carefully rendered?
- Did the painter use long, wavy strokes, or short, choppy ones?
- Can you see the strokes at all? Or do they blend into each other and become invisible?
- Does the paint create blobs? Ridges? Flat patches? Stains?
- What kind of paint was used: oil, acrylic, tempera, watercolor, or something else?
- What particular effects are achieved by the kind of paint used?
- How was the paint applied: by brush, palette knife, or airbrush? Was it poured on? Sponged on? Rolled on?

Texture is also affected by the surface on which the artist paints. Since the Renaissance, most artists have used canvas. For special effects, some artists use a rough textured surface such as burlap or handmade paper, or a smooth surface such as masonite, plastic or glass.

Volume

Painters create the illusion of solid forms, or volumes, in their paintings. Although volumes in the real world are typically self-contained, measurable, and have weight, they may take on remarkably different aspects in a painting. Ask yourself:

- Are the volumes hard, clear, and distinct? Or soft, vague, and ephemeral? Are they thick and bulky, or thin and attenuated? Are they rounded or angular?
- How are the volumes created? By light and shadow? By color changes? By the use of lines?
- Are the volumes fully rounded? In low relief? Or do the figures and objects seem flat?

Shape

We can interpret the figures and objects we see in a painting as volumes. We can also see them as shapes. Shapes are flat, self-contained areas made up of objects or clusters of objects. The areas around or between the objects may also be identified as shapes. These so-called negative shapes can be just as important to the composition of the painting as the objects themselves.

Line

The edges of shapes can be seen as lines. Ask yourself:

- Are the lines straight or curved? Long or short? Are they choppy? Smooth? Wobbly? Thick or fine?
- If straight, do they make sharp angles?
- If curved, are the curves busy or simple?
- Do the lines bring movement into the painting?
- Are the lines clear and well defined or soft and blurry?
- Are there lines at all?

Compositional Lines

Paintings are often organized within units-- shapes or clusters of shapes--separated by lines, actual or implied. These lines, which we may call compositional lines, give the painting order, structure, and coherence. At the same time, they guide the eye through the painting.

Compositional lines are the skeletal elements of a painting. Sometimes this kind of line is called "*axis.*" If the composition is balanced on either side of the compositional line, the line is regarded as an *axis.*

Look for the major compositional line along which the picture seems to be arranged. It is likely to be the first line you notice. Ask yourself:

- What drew your attention to it?
- Is it horizontal? Vertical? Diagonal? Curved?
- How does it function?
- Does it separate something?
- Does it draw your attention to something?
- Does it have a dual function?
- Does the painting contain two or more of these lines? What is their relationship?

If the major compositional line is horizontal, it will tend to give a calm quality to the painting. Vertical lines are assertive, dignified, and uplifting. Curves give movement to a painting; diagonals inject excitement. These reactions are probably rooted in human psychology.

Combinations of compositional lines may structure a painting along an X form or a spiral; they may build along diagonals or curves, or create more stable shapes: rectangular, square, or pyramidal. Identifying these shapes will help you to see the composition of the painting.

Composition

Composition refers to how a work of art is put together, or organized. Shapes and compositional lines are important elements of composition. Even color and light may be used as compositional devices. Since representational painting often looks so natural, our tendency is to overlook composition and to take for granted the placement of the various elements in the painting. By studying the roles played by color, light, shapes, and compositional lines, you can see that they act to draw your eye through the painting in an orderly way: emphasizing that which is important and subordinating that which is less important. Ultimately, the purpose of composition is to give form to an idea as clearly and as forcefully as possible.

When you look at a painting, notice where your eye comes to rest. This is called the *focal point.* Typically this will be the most important part of the painting, the key area that is the heart of the painting. Ask yourself:

- Why your eye rests at that place.
- What path or paths directed your eye to it?
- What keeps your eye there?

A painting may have more than one focal point or none at all:

- Does more than one place hold your eye?
- Does that add to the effect of the painting, or does it detract from it?

Composition has to do with the selection and arrangement of elements. What the painter selects to paint is important, but where that element is placed in the picture can be just as important. For example, a figure shown close up will be imposing; a figure painted in the distance will be less so. A figure placed at the edge of the picture will have a different feeling from a figure located in the center.

Ask yourself:

- Do you look up, down, or across at the figure in the portrait?
- Are the still-life objects placed below you on a table or elevated to eye level?
- Is the horizon of the landscape high, or is it low?
- Do you get a bird's-eye view?
- Are you near or far?
- Do you seem to be standing at the center of things or off to one side? Your distance from the subject, and the point of view that you are given, establishes a particular psychological relationship with what is in the painting.
- What is the relationship of the main figures to the background?
- How important is the setting?
- How much of the background do you see?
- How much detail is given around the figure?

Surface Pattern

Figures and objects are arranged beside each other on the flat surface of any painting. Figures and objects may also appear to be located in receding space. It is useful to keep these two situations distinct when investigating composition. The pattern of a painting, its arrangement of shapes and lines on the surface, is one thing; depth is another.

Paintings are structured in various ways with regard to surface and space, and these structures affect the character of the painting. Let's start with surface pattern. Look at the way the left and the right sides of a painting relate to each other. Ask yourself:

- Is the painting symmetrical, that is, evenly balanced?
- Is it asymmetrical, that is, do contrasting shapes and colors act as weights and balances, forces and counter forces?
- Does the painting seem to build up gradually as your eye moves into it from the side?
- Are the figures and objects crowded? Comfortable? Spread out? Isolated?

The surface pattern of a painting may suggest a rhythm to you. You may also discover rhythms within distinct areas of the painting. Rhythm is created by the repetition of similar shapes, lines, or colors, just as the repetition of a beat creates rhythm in music. Rhythms knit together the various parts. Though they may be more difficult to identify than in music, visual rhythms may be an important structural element in a painting.

Space

Now consider the space:

- How are you carried back into the picture? Gradually? Predictably? Or are you snapped back suddenly into the distance?
- Is the space orderly? Measurable? Ambiguous? Clear?
- Is it deep or is it shallow?
- Is it flat?

Ask yourself, how does the artist achieve the illusion of depth in the picture?

- By means of overlapping planes?
- Decreasing the size?
- By contrasts of dark and light?
- Going from high contrast colors in the foreground to low contrast colors in the distance?
- Using bright colors in the foreground and pale colors in the distance (*atmospheric perspective*)?
- Does the artist construct a mathematically based perspective system (*linear perspective*)?
- Does the artist provide paths to lead your eye back into space?
- Conversely, does the artist do things to flatten space and bring the background closer?

We have asked many questions, not all of which can be answered in every case. Some of these questions just won't apply to the image you might be looking at or thinking about. But others will, and you can think up more, depending on what you are analyzing. Because every painting you look at presents you with a unique situation, it's up to you to see what you can find in it:

- What do you notice first? Why?
- Which elements seem to dominate? Which are less important?
- What do they contribute?
- What multiple functions might they have?
- What effect do they have on the painting?

Always keep in mind that a serious painter will try to consider every aspect of his or her painting, leaving nothing to chance.

To assess the impact of a particular element, try to imagine what the painting would look like if that element were altered or replaced with something different. Without touching the painting, block out an area with your hand to help yourself visualize the change:

- What would the landscape be like if a certain tree were removed from the foreground, or if it bent a different way?
- What would the portrait be like if you weren't looking *up* at a king?
- What would happen if the background to a figure were more detailed? Less detailed?
- If the sky were bluer, or grayer?
- If the water were rougher, or smoother?
- If the paint were thicker or thinner?
- If the colors contrasted more, or contrasted less?

Then go further in your analysis. Try to recognize the roles that the formal elements play and to discover how they function in the painting. Ultimately, you will want to see how they affect the painting and your experience of it.

The roles played by color, light, texture, volumes, shapes, lines, pattern, and space can be described best by words drawn from analogous non visual experiences. Colors are aptly characterized as "warm" and "cool". Color can also be sweet, sour, luscious, luminous, velvety, austere, harsh, or gentle. Color can scream, and it can whisper. Light can be warm or cool, hot or cold; it can be harsh, gentle, cheerful, or eerie. Texture can be rough or polished, heavy or light, turbulent or serene. Brushstrokes can be deft, dashing, turbulent, coarse, or refined. Volumes can be robust or delicate, heavy or light, aggressive; or tranquil. Shapes can be gentle, graceful, robust, eccentric, or harsh. Lines can be graceful, nervous, gentle, violent, soft, strong, elegant or crude. The surface arrangement can be balanced, stately, harmonious, simple complex, or chaotic. Rhythms can be quick, graceful, regular, off-beat, solemn, or monotonous. Space can be tense, serene, constricting, ample, logical, or dreamlike.

Think of every painting as having a personality. Can you see it as happy, gentle, vigorous, pompous, honest, polished, coarse, loud, quiet, elegant, sensuous, or austere? Or can you think of it as having a certain taste or flavor or fragrance?

These ways of describing paintings and what is in them are not, of course, precise. But they may be the best way of showing how formal elements function in a painting and determine its character.

CONCLUSION

By going beyond merely *describing* the subject matter to looking at *how* the subject matter is presented, you will come to a deeper understanding of the painting. Your investigation of formal elements will help you to see the painting through the eyes of the painter. By becoming aware of the formal relationships that are subtly embedded in a painting, you will discover what was done to give it character and interest. Your questions will also reveal the attitudes and feelings of the artist toward the subject matter. Isolating and examining the formal elements will help you to learn in the clearest possible way what the painting is meant to say and will enable you to establish what is possibly the most intimate and pleasurable relationship to the painting.

Formal analysis is a point of departure in the investigation of art. It is a way of looking that can take you from sight to insight. Formal analysis opens the doors to appreciation by helping you to see that a representational painting does not just mirror reality, but makes a statement about it. And it helps you to read and to interpret that statement as thoroughly and as lucid as possible.

Based on: *More Than You See, A Guide to Art,* by Frederick A. Horowitz, 2nd Edition 1992.