

SIMPLE STEPS TO READING A PAINTING
A TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE
TAKING A VISUAL INVENTORY

Children and adults all too often “read” a painting with only one set of tools, the first and automatic reaction or intuition about what a painting is trying to say or do. This reaction is, of course, an excellent gauge to first impression, but can often be the last impression as well, leaving the viewer with perhaps only a piece of the puzzle. Those of us try to lead groups and individuals into discussion about a work of art tend to dart somewhat erratically from one point to another, as something catches our eye or demands our attention. The following exercise can be used to order your thoughts into a sequence that can be used for deeper interpretation.

Methods:

- Students can work in small groups, with one person designated as the “scribe”. The scribe can keep people on task, keep written lists of the group’s response to the line of questioning and report out for their group after the activity is complete. Otherwise, students can work individually or in pairs with written response, with select students reporting out on individual components and other students adding their observations
- Teacher or Guide may verbally lead the group through the activity through group discussion and solicitation of individual response. Order your thoughts and questions following the sequence below: DESCRIPTION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, and EVALUATION.
- Once the process of questioning is complete you may then begin the interpretation and evaluation of the particular work of art that has been viewed.
- The line of questioning can apply to both representational and abstract art, and can be adapted, by slight rephrasing of words to fit almost any medium of art.
- Please remember that “reading” art is a slow, thoughtful and exciting process of discovery.

I. DESCRIBE

This is the process of taking an inventory of the objects, incidents, or other visual information in a work of art. It can be a simple list compiled by a viewer or a group of viewers. The essential word here is what (with no interpretation or reaction from the viewer).

- What objects do you see?
- What incidents are represented?
- Have I identified all the parts of this work?
- Have I listed everything in this work so that some one could use my notes to list all the objects?

II. ANALYZE

This is a simple inventory that separates the visual components of the work of art into its parts. This inventory is a “formal” analysis of how the artistic elements were handled and organized by the artist. It is important that during the analyzing phase, the students not venture into speculation or meaning.

COLOR

Color is used to help achieve many things. Color can create the illusion of depth, achieve balance, and animate. Colors can have symbolic connotations and can promote emotional feelings. Color can react to other colors and express different qualities of light.

- What colors are important to this work?
- Does color lead your eye anywhere?
- Would the effect of this work be different if the colors were changed?
- What connotations, associations or symbolic meanings might the colors in this work have?

BALANCE

Balance is a principle of composition. It can be generally broken down into symmetrical or asymmetrical balance. Symmetry generally conveys a sense of order, while asymmetrical usually expresses action, tension or movement. Of course the use of balance in context with the subject matter can further emphasize or offset the two generalizations.

- Is this image balanced, off balance, otherwise?
- Does the image lie within the canvas or go past the edges?

- What parts of the painting does the balance effect?

SPACE

Some paintings look flat others have depth. Sometimes space is ambiguous. When there is an illusion of depth and breadth in a painting, it is often achieved by the depiction of overlapping planes, by using a “vanishing point” or by use of color and light.

- How do we travel through this painting?
- How deep does the space appear to be in this work?
- How is our eye drawn across the surface of the work
- Is it slow, fast?
- Does it straight, diagonally, zigzag?

LINE

Lines can create rhythmic patterns and suggest movement, as well as define edges, create a three-dimensional effect (modeling), or otherwise evoke a response in a viewer.

- Are the lines in this work the same throughout?
- Are they thick, thin, ragged, smooth, controlled, etc.?

COMPOSITION

Composition is the overall arrangement of space. Form and color create a structure that can symbolize meaning in a work.

- What shapes are in this work?
- How are they arranged?
- How do they relate to one another?
- Did the artists paint things as they were seen, or were they distorted?

LIGHT AND CONTRAST

Like color, light helps create balance or a sense of space; it can animate and emphasize parts of a painting.

- Does the light in this work come from a source or is it ambient?
- Are the parts of the painting emphasized by light?
- Does the light seem to be painted as it was seen, or has the artist invented it?

TECHNIQUE

Technique is the way that the artist has chosen to use the materials of art making. The creation is through brushstroke, paint thickness, surface texture, etc.

- Are the brushstrokes visible?
- If so, what do they look like?
- Are the marks and strokes the same everywhere?
- Is the manner of stroking slow and meticulous or have they been put on in a quick “painterly fashion”?
- Is there more paint in one place than another?

III. INTERPRET

This is the conscious and deliberate attempt to speculate about and articulate the meaning of a work of art based on the observations assembled as a result of description and analysis.

- What does everything in the painting add up to?
- What does it seem to mean?
- Have my feelings about this work changed as a result of the formal analysis?

IV. EVALUATE

Judgment about a work of art must be based on an informed opinion. Once you have really seen everything about the work of art, you are in a position to judge it. Ideally, judgment has nothing to do with personal preferences but it is based on the consideration as to the success of the work of the artist to achieve what he or she intended to express.

Judging a painting is a natural thing, and in most cases cannot be avoided. It is important to separate whether you like something or not versus whether it is successful in terms of the artist intention.