

The Art Institute of Chicago
Department of Museum Education

HOW ARE STUDENTS LOOKING AT AND UNDERSTANDING ART?

Stages of Aesthetic Development
Abigail Housen, Visual Understanding in Education

Stage I—ACCOUNTIVE viewers are storytellers. Using their sense and personal associations, they weave concrete observations about the work of art into a narrative. Here, they base judgements on what they know and like. Emotions color their comments as the viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of the unfolding drama.

Stage II—CONSTRUCTIVE viewers set about building a framework for looking at a work of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own knowledge of the natural world and of their social, moral, and traditional world. If the work is unconventional—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, function are obscure (if the tree is orange instead of brown, if themes of motherhood have been transposed into wars on sexuality)—then, this viewer discounts the work, deems it "weird," lacking, and of no value. As emotions begin to go underground, this viewer begins to distance him or herself from the work of art and to develop an interest in the artist's intentions.

Stage III—CLASSIFYING viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance. They decode the surface of the canvas for clues, using their vast library of facts and figures. Properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

Stage IV—INTERPRETIVE viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the canvas, letting the meaning of the work slowly unfold, they appreciate the subtleties of line, shape, and color. Now critical skills are put in the service of feeling and intuition, as these viewers let the meaning of the work and its symbols emerge. They know that the identity and value of the work of art is subject to chance and change, and that each new encounter presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences.

Stage V—RE-CREATIVE viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now "willingly suspend disbelief." A familiar painting is like an old friend: known intimately, yet full of surprise and needing attention on a mundane level as well as on an elevated plane. In all important friendships, time is a key ingredient. ~~Knowing the ecology of the work—its time, history, questions, travels, intricacies—~~and drawing on his or her own history of the work in particular, and with viewing, in general, allow this viewer to combine a more personal contemplation with one that more broadly encompasses universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

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Cognitive Developmental Account of the Aesthetic Experience
Michael J. Parsons, University of Utah

Stage I (Favoritism)

- The only experience with a work of art is mine; no recognition of the experience of others, or what an "experience" might even be; little awareness of other points of view
- Perceiving each part of an object, not the object as a collective whole made up of parts
- An innocent eye which depends on personal preferences, not capable of distinguishing a "subject"; liking a painting with lots of blue because blue is your favorite color
- Intuitive delight in most objects with a free response to subject matter; accepting what comes to mind while not deciding if it is relevant
- Objects stimulate pleasant experience; no sense of objectivity; everything is judged "good"

Stage II (Beauty and Realism)

- Emphasis on the subject; recognition that the purpose of an art object is to represent something
- An object has the same qualities as its subject; for example, beautiful paintings have beautiful subjects
- Beauty, realism, and evidence of skill are highly valued
- Not able to distinguish between describing facts and forming an interpretation based on these facts; everyone sees the same thing as me; not aware of having to interpret a work
- Can distinguish what is aesthetically relevant or related to the experience and what is not; liking a painting with lots of blue because it is done well, not because blue is your favorite color

Stage III (Expressiveness)

- Understands that an object's subject can be something beyond the concrete object itself
- Understands that meaning is arrived at through the experience of a viewer, and thus meaning can be subjective
- Able to relate different parts of an object to create and support meaning
- ~~Meaning can come from a particular viewer's experience; does not expect all viewers~~ to have the same experience or arrive at the same meaning; recognizes meaning is found within the viewer, not on the canvas
- Recognizes that a function of art is to be expressive and to provide an experience; subject matter is secondary to the experience

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Stage III (Expressiveness), con't

- Better grasp of expressive qualities; recognizes that realism and skill are means of expression, not ends; open to a wider range of works

Stage IV (Style and Form)

- Recognizes that meaning making is not an *individual* subjective activity, but subjective within a *collective* social/historical context; consensus is a validation of meaning; work exists within a tradition where it is discussed by a variety of people
- Meaning comes from a web of viewers discussing and experiencing an object; medium and form are now emphasized as this is how we enter the dialogue
- Recognizes the power of the medium, that expressiveness stems from the way an object is produced
- Able to distinguish between appeal of the subject and what is actually achieved by the work

Stage V (Autonomy)

- We don't take the meaning we create for granted as we know our future experiences will influence and change our meaning
- Recognize the need to test your meaning in the public/historical context to make sure it is valid
- Recognizes the need to seek reasons for interpretations; knowing that your meaning may be found invalid by some and that you must be able to support it; consensus is a given if the meaning is valid
- Recognizes that the tradition and its categories are constructions, not truths; art thus *raises questions* about the tradition rather than transmits truths about the tradition

Excerpted by Christine Baker Mitton from:

Parsons, Michael J. *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Developmental Account of the Aesthetic Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

———. "Talk About a Painting: A Cognitive Developmental Analysis," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 1987, 21(1) 37-55.

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DEVELOPING A QUESTIONING STRATEGY

PARTS OF A QUESTIONING STRATEGY

Describing Questions

What do we see?

- General questions that motivate observation
- Using perceptual (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling) and language skills to acquire information
- *With works of art:* discussing the formal elements of art—line, shape, color, texture, pattern
 - What's going on here? What do you see?
 - What do you see that makes you say that?
 - How many different colors do you see? Where do you see them?
 - Where do you see straight lines? Where do you see curved lines?
 - What is this man wearing?

For Grades 3 and above:

Analyzing Questions

How can we categorize what we see?

- Organizing and processing the visual information we observe
- Applying reasoning skills when looking at objects
- Making comparisons and finding contrasts
 - Why do you think that?
 - Does everyone agree? Why or why not?
 - How are warm and cool colors used differently in this painting?
 - How do all these curved lines make you feel?
 - What do all of these people have in common?
 - What season do you think it is? Why?
 - What skills would you need to make this painting?

For Grades 6 and above:

Interpreting Questions

What do we think or know about the object based on what we see?

- Reflecting on and thinking about a work of art based on what you see
- Go beyond known information to create a meaning for the work of art
- Formulate and defend a hypothesis (an assumption or informed guess)
 - Is that something you SEE, or something you THINK based on what you see?
 - What don't you know about this painting?
 - Why do you think the artist chose to use color in this way?
 - What will happen next in this scene?
 - If you could give this painting a new title, what would it be and why?

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DEVELOPING A QUESTIONING STRATEGY

KINDS OF QUESTIONS

Open-Ended Questions:

- Have no predetermined responses
- Encourage divergent, creative thinking
- Ask us to consider a range of possibilities
- Allow students to continually examine art for new and expanding meanings

Close-Ended Questions:

- Have specific, concrete answers
- Encourage convergent thinking
- Ask us to narrow our focus to a specific possibility or focus
- Force students to look at art to find the "right" answer

What is the difference between open-ended and close-ended questions?

Does the artist use warm colors here?

OR

How does the artist use warm colors in this painting?

Is this man in the foreground a policeman?

OR

How do we know what this man's job is? What clues do we have?

Is this a beautiful object?

OR

Why do you think this object is valued by the museum today?