Jump
Starting Visual Literacy

Choosing objects to introduce the wonders of art to beginning viewers should be a thoughtful process. When we as parents and teachers choose books to engage early readers, we carefully consider both what the new readers are ready for developmentally and what captures and is likely to sustain their interest. No one questions this logic, in part because we recognize that reading is a skill acquired through one’s own effort and practice. We learn to read through the activity of reading; others assist by supplying the right challenge at the right time.

Why not apply the same principles to choosing art to engage and motivate beginning viewers? If we want novices to develop solid rapport with art based on direct, personal connections, why shouldn’t we think about what art is appropriate to get them started? If we also want them to learn to “read” it on their own—to become self-sufficient viewers—why shouldn’t we think about what best stimulates ongoing growth?

According to psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1969), the habit of using one’s eyes to learn is acquired early. Arnheim has detailed how sophisticated and thoughtful the process of vision actually is. Beginning in infancy, we learn to recognize, categorize, and sort out all manner of objects, people, activities, and phenomena such as weather, colors, or moods. Developmentalists such as Jean Piaget make it clear that we learn all of this from interactions with our concrete and physical environment, which gradually comes to include not just physical elements but also representations of these in images and signs. Most images first shown to us are simple pictures, often used to help us learn language. Over time, we encounter images in many media that go beyond simple representation and include documentary evidence of events, people, and places, as well as stories and material that are open to interpretation. Art is the most complex form of object and imagery. Constructing insightful meaning from it requires more time, focus, effort, thought, and information than is required for the less complicated visual material encountered in the everyday world.

Unfortunately, interactions with art in contemporary U.S. culture are minimal and rare in education as well. Visitors often enter museums unprepared for what they find. It makes sense, then, for those of us who are particularly invested in the value of art to maximize any opportunity and to teach in such a way as to increase capacities—and indeed maintain the openness with which naive viewers begin.

BY PHILIP YENAWINE
One challenge educators face when trying to intervene in ways that prompt the visual learning process, obvious as it seems, is realizing that not all art is the same. In truth, objects lumped together as art are enormously diverse in content, degree of ambiguity, intention, style, materials, and so forth. Some art tells stories and is full of recognizable or naturalistic depiction. Other is stylized or idealized—both for different reasons. Some art is abstract. Much is dense with information, multi-layered, or symbol-laden, while other art is spare or more about pattern than content. Some art is emotionally expressive, while other is detached or cerebral. Some is created to challenge and provoke, while other is decorative, designed to please. Some is functional, or at least was in its original context.

These various forms of art are not equally accessible in terms of meaning. The degree of ambiguity varies. Intentions can be obvious or obscure. What is transparent in one culture or at one time may be opaque in another. The meaning and even the purposes of much art, especially art of the past, is speculative and subject to plausible interpretation only by those who have studied it for years. Religious and symbol-laden objects, as well as much modern and contemporary art, are intended for audiences that share specific information and attitudes, and it remains truly available only to those who gain specific knowledge. In such cases, if we do not know the intentions of the artist or culture, we are left with limited, often mistaken understandings. Clearly, the subjects of some art—war, the subconscious, and sexuality, for example—are more appropriate for adults than children.

If our intention as teachers is to teach viewers to actively construct their own understandings of art—to increase their capacities as viewers—it is useful to recall the analogy to early reading choices. It makes sense to distinguish one kind of art from others and to consider what is most accessible to beginning viewers of different ages and backgrounds. Even though many seem open to anything we present, some objects will be easier to enter and understand.

Beginning in 1991 while at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City, my colleagues and I initiated a process of considering images that jump-start the journey toward visual literacy. We were guided by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen’s (2000-2001) research into the viewing process and her Stages of Aesthetic Development.

The following provides an overview of the museum’s first three Aesthetic Stages:

**Stage I Accountive viewers** are storytellers. Using their senses, memories, and personal associations, they make concrete observations about a work of art that are woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color their comments, as viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of its unfolding narrative.

**Stage II Constructive viewers** set about actively building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral, and conventional world. If the work does not look the
way it is “supposed to”—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subject seems inappropriate—then these viewers judge the work to be “weird,” lacking, or of no value. Their sense of what is realistic is the standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, these viewers begin to distance themselves from the work of art.

**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 work using their library of facts and figures, which they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art’s meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

The information Housen derived from studying viewers’ thinking enabled us to link image choices to beginning viewers’ interests, strengths, and areas of potential growth. Housen discovered that the majority of museum visitors are in the early stages of aesthetic development and that all viewers follow a trajectory of growth through these stages. Beginning viewers, those in Housen’s Stages I and II, use a range of observations to draw conclusions that are full of associations, memories, facts, and emotions. Our premise was that visual learning would occur when the viewing experience addressed the needs and concerns of viewers and appropriately challenged their abilities. Working with Housen (2000-2001), we conducted field research, in conjunction with the development of a curriculum called Visual Thinking Strategies, to see if our choices had the desired impact.

The abbreviated suggestions that follow derive from our findings and are meant to aid the selection of images whether thinking about objects highlighted for museum visits or as part of materials prepared for classroom teaching.

**Accessibility.** According to Housen, beginning viewers, particularly those in Stages I and II, make sense of what they encounter based on what they already know. They look for narratives in art; their viewpoints are often idiosyncratic and based on personal experience. Thus, one essential requirement for art images introduced to them is accessibility: Are viewers likely to recognize what they observe? Can they make reasonable associations with images based on existing knowledge?

Accessible imagery allows viewers to discover intended meanings on their own. Each encounter leads to successful interpretation, without expert intervention. From this, viewers learn to trust that most art can be interpreted to a meaningful degree through examination, association, and deduction—and that they are capable of this level of interpretation. Pictures should thus include identifiable and reasonably familiar people, actions, interactions, settings, and emotions.

Puzzling beginning viewers intrigues them, but stumpimg them is not useful. It is important for beginners, especially older ones, to conclude a looking experience thinking that they had legitimate insights. Admittedly, they might miss elements of any given picture, will not “know” art historical information, and might make mistakes in interpretations despite our best efforts to select appropriate images. But all learning involves stages where knowledge is incomplete and understanding limited. Educators in other areas expect the gradual accumulation of skills and knowledge, and it behooves us to be patient as well.

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Narrative. Housen has found that beginning viewers look for stories in art, even when they are not there. Our selection should, therefore, give them ample opportunity to exercise this 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.

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 finding meaning in a wide range of art, even if little aware of it. Diversity builds flexibility and an appreciation of humanity's array of creative expression. If presented with a range of styles and themes, beginning viewers become aware of subjects, values, and appearances beyond the viewer's own experience or biases. Art from various times and places allows for history to become concrete, something that gains in importance over time. Variety allows for more people to find their interests, preferences, and backgrounds represented. Image selections should, in my view, also be sensitive to gender and racial representation of artists and subjects as well as to environment and ethnicity of the viewers.

Please consider, however, that diversity is an objective, and we should nonetheless always consider each work's relevance to particular viewers' lives. Are viewers likely to be able to identify and accurately understand key elements, based on previous experiences? We want them to apply existing knowledge to figure out what is not known but not leave them with false impressions. If we select carefully—choosing an African mother and child instead of, say, a power figure—we give beginning viewers a chance to apply what they know about family and love to an object that might be quite foreign in appearance. They construct meaning in keeping with the intentions of the work while practicing decoding a distant visual language.

Realism. It stands to reason that varied forms of realism—from naturalism and romanticism to expressionism and some forms of stylization and idealization—are accessible to beginning viewers, stylistically. In the case of photorealism, it depends on how interesting and relevant the subject is. Certain examples of surrealism can be appreciated, especially after some earlier experience with images whose logic corresponds to the "real world."

Media. Again, diversity of media leads to flexibility later. Paintings are useful because they are ubiquitous through history and often thought of as the most important artistic medium of a culture. Furthermore, they communicate by several means, including both

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**Sequences.** Once choices are made, it makes sense to put the images in a sequence leading from simpler to more complex. “Simpler images” include those in which there are clearer and fewer possible meanings, fewer details, less density of content. “More complex images” refers to those 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, and where symbolism and metaphor are important.

**Series and Themes.** Generally, images should be presented in series, united by some visual element or theme. For beginning viewers, this suggests obvious links, such as mothers and children, people playing or working, rather than a subtle, underlying theme such as joy. It is unlikely that beginning viewers will notice such interconnections. Still, many themes, ideas, subjects, and values transcend time and cultures, and such insight will be recognized at some point. Meanwhile, thematic groupings provide a useful organizational logic.

**Things to Avoid.** At beginning levels avoid introducing art that requires specialized information if viewers are to find meanings intended by the artist or culture on their own. (By Housen’s Stage III, viewers want to interpret work analytically using facts and figures; seeking information is itself an intriguing pursuit, but it barely factors in before Stage III.) Historical, religious and mythological, and ethnic-specific subjects are generally in this category because of their specificity: There are “correct answers,” and misinterpretations can be misleading and intellectually false. That being said, 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. Many myths and historical images may be understood for their drama, if not specifics of character and circumstance. Choosing, therefore, becomes thoughtful discriminating between images that are accessible to a large degree and those that are not. It is perfectly reasonable to test images to find those from which people can draw plausible meanings.

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

In general, certain subjects should be avoided, not because they are unimportant or because under some circumstances they cannot be discussed productively, but because public situations involve too many variables to ensure a positive experience. Images depicting violence, specific political stances, specific religious imagery, nudity, overt sexuality and sensuality, and grotesque or macabre subjects may cause beginning viewers difficulty because the values expressed conflict with their own. The point of initial forays into art is not to challenge deeply held views or to force conversation about taboo subjects, but to encourage looking, thinking, and the development of well-founded interpretations. Highly charged subjects, experimental techniques, and challenging styles can divert viewers from this focus.

Abstractions are discouraged for beginning viewers not because they dislike them, but because they continue to look for stories—often idiosyncratic and imaginative fantasies—where none
is intended by the artist. Even for adult viewers, early experiences with art remain within the realm of the concrete and the obvious; thinking abstractly is a sophisticated behavior, one that must be grown into.

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. Even appreciation of beauty presupposes experience. Similarly, most decorative arts and architecture are difficult for beginning viewers to appreciate because so much of their meaning has to do with either abstract issues (e.g., status, power, wealth, space, proportion) or with the use of materials and craftsmanship that are not the concerns of beginners. Experience and time will eventually lead the viewer to these special areas of art. Again, studying Housen, we can see that from late Stage II onward, all kinds of art are negotiable and attractive to viewers. Taste is by then likely to be a deciding factor in what will most interest the viewer.

Specific Considerations for Younger Viewers. Very young viewers (up to age 7) are usually satisfied with finding, naming, listing, counting, scouting out—and to some extent making up stories about what they see. Overall, images for them should be fairly simple—even spare—so not to overwhelm. Imagery should be familiar, of course, and clearly rendered to allow for many concrete observations, which is the arena in which they operate. Make it easy for them to identify people (especially children and families), objects, actions, gestures, and expressions. They are not naturally inclined to reasoning, seeking out levels of meaning, or pulling back and reflecting. Select accordingly.

For Viewers with Some Experience. During Housen’s Stage II, where most adult museum visitors are, viewers are aware of artists and interested in what they think and feel. Images that include artists at work and self-portraits are recommended. It might also be useful to have groups of pictures by single artists to allow viewers to delve into an individual’s way of working, choice making, or concerns. Stage II viewers may also be concerned about why things appear as they do, perhaps manifesting this with questions or challenging remarks. Both technique and logic are issues: Things should appear in art as they are “supposed” to be in life. Viewers may be more conservative in their tastes than they were at the beginning, when they were in Stage I; the so-called openness of those Stage I viewers is actually a matter of ignorance, which, as we have been told, is bliss. After some experience, personal tastes, attitudes, and values come into play. We should respect this if we want to keep viewers searching for meaning in new ways, instead of sidetracking them into arguments about what is right or wrong with a style, technique, or subject. In terms of style, staying within the framework of realist tradition will avoid consternation, but the boundaries can be pushed by way of expressionist works and surrealism.
Conclusion

The impetus to consider image selection in terms of beginning viewer interests and skills results from Housen's research. Her data open new doors for museum educators. She discovered the strengths of beginning viewers, and we can now make choices building on what people naturally want to do. We can see what capacities can be strengthened and predict what is most likely to produce growth.

In applying Housen's work to museum teaching, one assumption we make is that viewing is best taught by activating learners—helping them look carefully, think about what they see, and articulate their responses to it. 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. 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 meanings in unfamiliar images much more productively than any individual alone could do. Through group process, the individual's possibilities are enhanced significantly.

By applying Housen's research with regard both to teaching method and image selection, we have been able to produce growth: Students who began as rank beginners grew, by the end of elementary school, to think in the same ways as randomly selected adult visitors at MOMA. In both cases, the norm is Stage II (Housen, 2000-2001). The students are, however, more open and flexible in their approaches to art; they are more observant, and they draw more conclusions, more confidently. They are almost ready for the kind of instruction that has traditionally dominated museum education: the careful, insightful presentation of information. A substantial part of the reason for this development is the choice of images, ones that invite them to become active, thorough, successful viewers.

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REFERENCES


FOOTNOTES

2Although evaluations of what audiences know have been conducted at many institutions, a great deal of data was collected at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, while I was director of education in the 1980s. Various reports prepared between 1985-93 are on file at MOMA and document a lack of knowledge about art.