
Finding Meaning in Visual Media: Strategies & Examples

Finding meaning in visual media involves understanding what the work is depicting and how the different artistic choices and techniques affect it. Explore more about finding meaning in visual media, including strategies in ~'reading~' visual media, and see some examples.

Reading Visual Media

Imagine you're a literary agent, and you're in charge of deciding which novels your publishing house is going to publish. One day, you get a pitch for a story that goes like this:

Some dudes take a really long walk and finally throw away some old jewelry.

No, right? That sounds deadly boring. But it's actually an internationally bestselling book series that got adapted as a blockbuster movie trilogy. Can you guess which one?

It's *Lord of the Rings* - that's literally what happens in *Lord of the Rings*. A bunch of characters spend most of three books walking to Mordor, and then Frodo destroys the Ring. The actual books are more interesting than the boring literal description because:

- They're full of interesting characters and places
- They're connected to themes, like good vs. evil, or the effects of technology on our lives
- They have engaging prose that the reader can appreciate

In this lesson, you'll learn to 'read' those kinds of interesting things into a painting. A lot of people don't know how to read a painting on any level beyond literally describing what's in it, which makes paintings about as dull as, 'some dudes take a walk.' But that's not all there is!

This painting is not about some guy on a horse any more than *Lord of the Rings* is about some dudes on a walk. In this lesson, you'll learn how to 'read' visual media the same way you 'read' books, so you can get more meaning from them and figure out what they're really about.



Two Questions

As the first step to finding meaning in visual media, a good starting point is to ask yourself two questions:

- What is the creator literally depicting?
- What choices is the creator making about how to depict that subject or idea, and what meaning do those choices convey?

To show you what this means, let's walk through the process with this picture of a guy on a horse.

1. What is the creator literally depicting?

In this case, it's a man in a red cape on a horse, pointing forward. That's nice, but it doesn't tell us very much about what the author is really trying to say. It's at the same level of interest as 'some dudes take a walk and get rid of a ring.' It's nice and all, but really, who cares? That's where question two comes in.

2. What choices is the creator making about how to depict that subject or idea, and what meaning do those choices convey?

This is where you start getting to the good stuff.

To answer this question, you'll need to look at how the author chooses to represent his or her subject. Look at the colors used, the composition of the work, and the relative positions and sizes of objects shown, plus techniques specific to the medium that the author is using.

- For sculpture, ask yourself: is the sculpture made of marble? Concrete? Metal? A mix of materials? How are the materials used to shape the form?
- For film or photography, look at camera angles, color filters, or film techniques like zooming or panning.

- For painting, examine what type of paint or style of painting is used.

Just to stick with our horse example, you could probably imagine painting a man on a horse in all kinds of different ways. In this case, the use of oil paints gives the man on horseback a very rich, intense color, which contrasts with the more yellow-gray tones of the background. This adds intensity to the painting and pulls the viewer's eye straight to the central figure. He looks dramatic and important.

Here's an example for contrast. In this picture, the color scheme creates a totally different mood. There's no high drama here, and there's no color contrast pulling attention to the person on the horse. Instead, the colors are more evenly distributed, and the color scheme suggests a pleasant, sunny day.



Lack of contrast

Another point to note here is the **composition**. Composition is the arrangement of the people, animals, and objects shown in a work. In the case of the first image, the man on horseback takes up most of the canvas, and he's right in the middle, which highlights his importance. The poses of the man and the horse also suggest forward motion, which gives the impression of power, success, and drive. You can see how the horse's mane and tail and the man's cloak are being blown forward by the wind, giving an extra impression of motion forward.

For contrast, here's another painting of a man on a horse.

You can see how in this painting, the artist made very different choices about the composition. There is no sense of forward motion, and the man on horseback doesn't look particularly powerful.

The composition and color in our original painting shows a powerful, important man - he's going places, and he's the center of attention. That alone makes the painting more interesting, because now we have a character to care about, just like Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship are more interesting than just some guys walking around.



Composition contrast

Context & References

After figuring out what the creator is depicting and how, it's time to look at the context of the painting. Does it show a specific person? What kinds of historical or cultural references is the work making? Look for:

- The title: The title of a work is often a clue telling you how to interpret it.
- Information about the creator: What was the creator's relationship to the subject of the painting?
- Allusions to myths or cultural themes: For example, a cherub typically represents love.

In this case, the subject is Napoleon Bonaparte, which we know from the label at the bottom left. In case there was any doubt, the title is 'Napoleon Crosses the St. Bernard.'

The painting was created by Jacques-Louis David, a French painter, in 1800.

During this time, Napoleon's political and military career was on the rise, and a little historical research about the painter tells us that David was a supporter of Napoleon's political regime. In this painting, he's depicting Napoleon specifically as a brave conquering hero, not just some dramatic person on a horse. It's a political statement, and a glorification of a man many people considered to be a tyrant.

Here's another picture of the same man by a different painter:

You can see how, in this case, the painting is presenting a totally different image of Napoleon: his slouched posture, angry expression, and disheveled clothes suggest defeat and powerlessness. By combining the questions from above about composition with the context of knowing who Napoleon was, you can understand the difference in meaning between these paintings.



Now the painting is much more interesting, because it actually has some relevance to real life. It touches on themes, like the glorification of war, the same way *Lord of the Rings* touches on themes like technology and change. That's much more meaningful than just some guy on a horse.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about 'reading' artistic media, like paintings, sculptures, movies, and photographs.

To 'read' a piece of visual media, first note what the work is literally showing. This is the 'some guy on a horse' level of analysis. It might be true, but it's not enough to interpret the painting, just like 'some dudes take a walk and get rid of an old ring' isn't enough to really understand what *Lord of the Rings* is about.

Then look at the choices the artist made about how to depict the subject, like the use of color, composition, materials, camera angles, and filming techniques. How do those choices change our understanding of the subject? What kind of statement do they make about the subject? How can the context of the work help you reflect on it?

Also look at the context of the work, including the title, historical context, and other important information that can help you interpret what it's referring to.

This will all help you get meaning from the painting, just like you would from a book.

Learning Outcomes

Successful completion of this lesson means that you can subsequently:

- Cite two questions one should ask in order to find meaning in visual media
- Identify artistic choices in color, composition, materials and more
- Articulate the way in which context and subject matter can influence someone's 'reading'

Questions

1. What is the first step in finding meaning in visual media?

- A) Identifying the historical context
- B) Asking about the creator's depiction
- C) Analyzing the color scheme
- D) Looking for the title

2. What does the use of intense colors in a painting likely signify?

- A) A lack of creativity
- B) High drama or importance
- C) A calm and serene scene
- D) Confusion and chaos

3. What does composition in visual media refer to?

- A) The background music in films
- B) The arrangement of elements in the work
- C) The choice of colors used
- D) The historical period it represents

4. How can the material of a sculpture contribute to its meaning?

- A) By making it more expensive
- B) Through the texture it presents
- C) By influencing its durability
- D) The choice of material can shape its form and convey specific ideas or emotions.

5. What role does the title of a work play in interpreting visual media?

- A) It provides a decorative element.
- B) It offers a clue for interpretation.
- C) It shows the creator's name.
- D) It indicates the year of creation.

6. Which of the following best describes why context is important in 'reading' visual media?

- A) It helps identify the creator.
- B) It provides background that influences interpretation.
- C) It indicates the popularity of the piece.
- D) It determines the media's value.

7. Why might an artist depict a subject with a slouched posture and disheveled clothes?

- A) To show elegance and grace
- B) To indicate defeat or powerlessness
- C) To display wealth and status
- D) To emphasize beauty and perfection

8. How can knowing the creator's relationship to the subject enhance understanding of a work?

- A) It provides a price estimate.
- B) It can reveal bias or perspective.
- C) It indicates the work's age.
- D) It specifies the media used.

9. In visual media, what does the presence of a cherub typically represent?

- A) Confusion
- B) Love
- C) Danger
- D) Wealth

10. How does contrast affect the viewer's attention in a painting?

- A) It makes the painting less interesting.
- B) It evenly distributes the viewer's attention.
- C) It directs focus to specific elements.
- D) It blurs the details of the painting.

11. What effect does forward motion in a painting's composition usually have?

- A) It suggests stagnation.
- B) It implies backward progress.
- C) It conveys a sense of power and direction.
- D) It indicates a lack of focus.

12. Why is a man on a horse a simplistic description for some paintings?



- A) It captures all the details accurately.
- B) It overlooks the deeper meaning and artistic choices.
- C) It overcomplicates the scene.
- D) It misidentifies the subject.

13. What does the use of oil paints contribute to a painting?

- A) Decreased value
- B) Quick drying times
- C) Rich, intense colors
- D) Simplicity in execution

14. Why might an artist choose a monochrome color scheme?

- A) To highlight the lack of skill
- B) To create high drama
- C) To convey a specific mood or atmosphere
- D) To reduce production costs

15. How can camera angles in film or photography influence interpretation?



- A) They standardize all films and photos.
- B) They dictate the genre of the work.
- C) They can manipulate the viewer's perspective and feelings.
- D) They determine the age of the camera used.

16. What does a sculpture's form reveal about its subject?

- A) The exact weight of the sculpture
- B) The price of materials used
- C) The artist's skill level
- D) The ideas or emotions it intends to convey

17. In what way do historical references enhance the meaning of visual media?

- A) They limit the audience's understanding.
- B) They provide depth and context.
- C) They make the work less accessible.
- D) They simplify the interpretation.

ANSWER: B

Essay Questions:



1. What emotions or themes do the colours and contrasts in this image evoke? Consider the transition from warm to cool tones and the presence of the solitary figure in the boat.

Write your answer in Word and email it to the teacher.

2. Look at the image of a man riding a horse. Describe how the colors, contrast, and camera angles contribute to the overall mood and message of the image. Consider what emotions or themes the artist might be trying to convey.



Answers

1. What is the first step in finding meaning in visual media?

- A) Identifying the historical context
- B) Asking about the creator's depiction
- C) Analyzing the color scheme
- D) Looking for the title

ANSWER: B

Explanation: The first step involves asking what the creator is literally depicting before analyzing further artistic choices and meanings.

2. What does the use of intense colors in a painting likely signify?

- A) A lack of creativity
- B) High drama or importance
- C) A calm and serene scene
- D) Confusion and chaos

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Intense colors draw the viewer's eye to the central figure, adding intensity and drama, highlighting importance.

3. What does composition in visual media refer to?

- A) The background music in films
- B) The arrangement of elements in the work
- C) The choice of colors used
- D) The historical period it represents

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Composition involves how objects, people, and elements are arranged in the media, affecting the viewer's perception and interpretation.

4. How can the material of a sculpture contribute to its meaning?

- A) By making it more expensive
- B) Through the texture it presents
- C) By influencing its durability
- D) The choice of material can shape its form and convey specific ideas or emotions.

ANSWER: D

Explanation: The material choice (marble, concrete, metal) affects the sculpture's appearance and can convey different meanings or themes.

5. What role does the title of a work play in interpreting visual media?

- A) It provides a decorative element.
- B) It offers a clue for interpretation.
- C) It shows the creator's name.
- D) It indicates the year of creation.

ANSWER: B

Explanation: The title often serves as a direct hint or guide on how to approach and understand the work.

6. Which of the following best describes why context is important in 'reading' visual media?

- A) It helps identify the creator.
- B) It provides background that influences interpretation.
- C) It indicates the popularity of the piece.
- D) It determines the media's value.

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Context, including historical, cultural, or personal background, deeply influences how a piece is interpreted and understood.

7. Why might an artist depict a subject with a slouched posture and dishevelled clothes?

- A) To show elegance and grace
- B) To indicate defeat or powerlessness
- C) To display wealth and status
- D) To emphasize beauty and perfection

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Such depiction suggests negative emotions or states like defeat, contrasting with representations of power or dignity.

8. How can knowing the creator's relationship to the subject enhance understanding of a work?

- A) It provides a price estimate.
- B) It can reveal bias or perspective.
- C) It indicates the work's age.
- D) It specifies the media used.

ANSWER: B

Explanation: The creator's perspective, including their personal or political stance, can significantly affect the work's meaning and interpretation.

9. In visual media, what does the presence of a cherub typically represent?

- A) Confusion
- B) Love
- C) Danger
- D) Wealth

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Cherubs are often used as symbols for love in various forms of visual media, hinting at underlying themes or emotions.

10. How does contrast affect the viewer's attention in a painting?

- A) It makes the painting less interesting.
- B) It evenly distributes the viewer's attention.
- C) It directs focus to specific elements.
- D) It blurs the details of the painting.

ANSWER: C

Explanation: Contrast, especially in color or lighting, draws the viewer's eye to particular areas or figures, emphasizing their importance.

11. What effect does forward motion in a painting's composition usually have?

- A) It suggests stagnation.
- B) It implies backward progress.
- C) It conveys a sense of power and direction.
- D) It indicates a lack of focus.

ANSWER: C

Explanation: Depicting subjects in motion, especially forward, suggests dynamism, progress, and sometimes power or ambition.

12. Why is a man on a horse a simplistic description for some paintings?

- A) It captures all the details accurately.
- B) It overlooks the deeper meaning and artistic choices.
- C) It overcomplicates the scene.
- D) It misidentifies the subject.

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Just like "some dudes take a walk" for "Lord of the Rings," a simplistic description misses the thematic depth and artistic nuances.

13. What does the use of oil paints contribute to a painting?

- A) Decreased value
- B) Quick drying times
- C) Rich, intense colors
- D) Simplicity in execution

ANSWER: C

Explanation: Oil paints are prized for their vibrant colors and depth, enhancing the visual impact and emotional intensity of the painting.

14. Why might an artist choose a monochrome color scheme?

- A) To highlight the lack of skill
- B) To create high drama
- C) To convey a specific mood or atmosphere
- D) To reduce production costs

ANSWER: C

Explanation: Monochrome schemes can simplify the scene, focusing on mood, atmosphere, or specific thematic elements without the distraction of color.

15. How can camera angles in film or photography influence interpretation?

- A) They standardize all films and photos.
- B) They dictate the genre of the work.
- C) They can manipulate the viewer's perspective and feelings.
- D) They determine the age of the camera used.

ANSWER: C

Explanation: Camera angles can significantly affect how a scene is perceived, influencing the emotional or psychological impact on the viewer.

16. What does a sculpture's form reveal about its subject?

- A) The exact weight of the sculpture
- B) The price of materials used
- C) The artist's skill level
- D) The ideas or emotions it intends to convey

ANSWER: D

Explanation: The form of a sculpture, shaped by its material and design, communicates the artist's intended message, theme, or emotion.

17. In what way do historical references enhance the meaning of visual media?

- A) They limit the audience's understanding.
- B) They provide depth and context.
- C) They make the work less accessible.
- D) They simplify the interpretation.

ANSWER: B

Explanation: Historical references can add layers of meaning, enriching the viewer's understanding by connecting the work to broader themes or events.

Essay Questions:



1. What emotions or themes do the colours and contrasts in this image evoke? Consider the transition from warm to cool tones and the presence of the solitary figure in the boat.

The image captures a tranquil lake scene at dusk, characterized by the soft gradients of pink, orange, and purple in the sky, which

gradually transition into the cool blues and indigos of the approaching night. This interplay of warm and cool tones not only enhances the beauty of the natural landscape but also symbolizes the passage of time—from the last moments of daylight into the calm of twilight. The reflection of these colors in the lake's surface adds depth to the scene and mirrors the dual nature of existence, blending day with night, light with darkness.

The solitary figure in the small boat, set against the backdrop of distant mountains and the expansive sky, evokes a sense of introspection and solitude. This lone figure's presence invites viewers to contemplate themes of personal journeys, the quest for peace, and the significance of moments of solitude in connecting with the natural world.

The contrast between the illuminated sky and the silhouetted landscape emphasizes the boundary between the known and the unknown, encouraging a reflection on the mysteries that lie beyond what is immediately visible. This boundary invites viewers to consider the

transition between visible and invisible, external beauty and internal reflection.

Overall, this image serves as a visual metaphor for introspection, peace, and the transient nature of time, encouraging viewers to pause and reflect on their own place within the natural world and the continuous cycle of life.

2. Look at the image of a man riding a horse. Describe how the colors, contrast, and camera angles contribute to the overall mood and message of the image. Consider what emotions or themes the artist might be trying to convey.



In this image, the artist utilizes a dynamic camera angle, capturing the action from a low perspective, which makes the horse and rider appear more grand and imposing. This angle often conveys a sense of power and heroism, as it places viewers in a position where they must look up at the subject, giving it a statuesque and dominant presence.

The colors in the image are desaturated, leaning towards earthy tones, which often evoke a feeling of grit, ruggedness, and intensity. The lack of vibrant color emphasizes the seriousness of the scene and may suggest a historical or battle-worn setting.

Contrast plays a significant role in this image. The stark contrast between the dark tones of the horse and rider and the lighter, dust-filled background creates a focal point on the action. It also gives the scene a dramatic and high-energy feel, as the flying dust suggests rapid movement and the chaos of battle.

The combined effect of the camera angle, color palette, and contrast creates an image that exudes strength, determination, and a sense of epic narrative, likely aiming to inspire awe and an emotional response from the viewer. The image could be suggesting themes of bravery, battle, and perhaps the triumph of man and nature working in unison.