

Seeing vs. Looking

**”I WONDER HOW MANY
PEOPLE I’VE LOOKED
AT ALL MY LIFE AND
NEVER SEEN.”**

-JOHN STEINBECK

The average museum visitor looks at a painting somewhere between 15-30 seconds. Do you think that you are truly looking at a painting that quickly, or just seeing it? To fully appreciate and understand a work of art, there are many things to consider including the artist’s objectives and tendencies, as well as the artwork’s visual elements. Once you consider these, you will find yourself really looking at, rather than just seeing the art.

Objectives & Tendencies

Style/Period

What are you seeking to understand? As art is essentially a visual history book and reflection of current times, if you understand what is happening historically – in areas like religion, politics, literature, science, etc. – you will also better understand the art of that period. What qualities do art from this time period share, etc.? What style of art are you seeing? Understanding what style of art will also offer more visual clues. Is it Renaissance? Pop Art? Modernism?

Timeline

Art develops concurrently with the society around it; consider it a visual history book. A timeline is important in understanding the developments that may have influenced artistic practices. As you will soon learn, art develops concurrently with the society around it. You can say that art is a type of visual history book.

Purpose

Why is art created? Is it functional or decorative or both? The purpose or function of a piece of art can tell you many things about the work itself. Is it an altar used for religious practices? Is it for public or private use/viewing?

Place of origin

Knowing where something originated also tells us a lot about a piece of art in terms of its style and the artist him or herself.

The Artist

What country is he or she from? Which time period is the artist working in? Who did this artist study with, and what influences did this have on their artwork?

Iconography

Iconography is the study and identification of subject matter. Iconography deals with the symbolic – often religious or mythological – meaning of objects, persons, or events depicted in works of art.

Historical Context

Art is truly a response to its environment. For example, Dadaism was a response to a war-torn Germany. Understanding the time period will help you better understand the context of the artwork.

Visual Elements

When considering the work of art itself, one must look at the work's organization and arrangement, in other words, its composition. Composition is the formal arrangement of the elements that make up a work of art, such as line, color and texture.

When you rearrange a room, you are constructing a composition – you put it together according to what looks pleasing to you. The same can be said of an artist's creation.

A primary tool of any artist is composition. When considering an artwork's composition, the artist chooses the order in which figures and objects will appear; color, texture and light are assigned their roles; and spatial relationships, balance, volume, and mass are weighed. Compositional elements and devices that add to a work are used while others are eliminated. Through the skillful use of the tools of organization and arrangement, the artist enhances the meaning of the work giving it individuality and reaching the viewer powerfully and memorably.

Very often certain standard devices are used to organize a composition. These devices represent solutions that artists have developed over the years to solve continual artistic problems. The following elements of composition act as devices that pull together and give art physical coherence:



Color

One of the first things a painter has to learn is the use of color. The color wheel displays the various relationships of color in terms of its three basic qualities: hue, value, and saturation. It provides a basic guide to the artist's colors.

Hue is the name of the color the eye thinks it is seeing. It is the greenness of green and the redness of red.

Value refers to the darkness or lightness of a color (hue). It is the amount of the light reflected by a hue. The greater the amount of light, the higher the value. Therefore, white has the highest value, and black the lowest.

Saturation, also called brilliance, refers to the intensity of a color. It is essentially the purity of a hue (color). The purer the hue, the higher the saturation. For example, a pale blue is considered to be less saturated (intense) than a deep, rich blue. Value and saturation are not constantly related.

The primary colors, red, yellow, and blue, are those which cannot be obtained by any combination or mixture of other hues. The secondary colors of orange, green, and violet are achieved by mixing the primary colors in various combinations. Complementary colors are those which are directly opposite each other on the color wheel. They are considered to be in extreme contrast to one another (such as red and green, which when placed side by side, intensify one another's appearance). Mixing two

complementary colors in equal proportions will produce gray, but adding some of the complement to the first hue will only dull it.

Colors are said to have the property of heat. Reds, yellows, and oranges are called warm colors, and seem to project themselves to the front of the painting. Greens, blues, and violets are cool colors, which seem to recede to the back of the painting. It is therefore possible for a painter to place one object in front of another by his or her choice of color.

The warm and cool properties of colors can also be used to heighten the psychological impact of a painting. Van Gogh is one of the many artists whose careful use of the emotional qualities of color adds psychological depth to his works.

Color theory has played a crucial role in art history. These theories seek to classify or systemize the way in which the eye sees color and provide the artist or viewer with a series of aesthetic guidelines.

Texture

Texture in art can be either that of the objects portrayed within the work – usually a painting – or the materials of the work of art itself. In painting, both approaches have been used, but in sculpture and architecture, the texture is usually that of the materials used.

In order to consider texture, one must look at the material being used – or the medium. The medium is the physical substance chosen as the vehicle of expression. For example, marble is a medium of sculpture, oil paint is a medium of painting, and stone or brick is a medium of architecture.

Texture and material are very important to the final work itself. For example, when looking at an Egyptian sculpture, hard stone like diorite contributes to the feeling of power and strength.

Van Gogh employs a technique called impasto to create texture in his paintings. Impasto is the texture produced by the thickness of pigment (paint) in a painting. The impasto technique adds three-dimensionality to a painting.

Picasso introduces violent contrasts of texture onto the canvas by attaching extraneous materials in a technique called collage.

Light

At different times, all of the visual arts have emphasized light in their compositions. In painting, the 17th century marked the beginning of a new consciousness of the possibilities of light.

The compositional use of light can lend drama and mystery to an artwork. It can be used to draw our eyes to central figures or actions. And, it can play a symbolic role or emit mood.

Light is also a major consideration in architecture. The character of the building is determined to an extent by the amount and kind of illumination provided. Gothic cathedrals, for example, were built to include as many stained-glass windows as possible. The light emitted into the church acted as a symbolic reminder that the world

within the church was different from the outside. In the 20th century, light played a paramount role in the architecture Frank Lloyd Wright. He sought to open his buildings out onto the landscape.

Linear vs. Painterly

Draftsmanship relies on line, the variety and organization of which gives forms their visual meaning. In the 1920s, Heinrich Wölfflin published his book, *Principles in Art History*, which was one of the first systematic studies on the dynamics of art history and appreciation.

In his book, Wölfflin developed categories for art objects, and analyzed the style and composition of many of these works in terms of these categories. Although some contemporaries find his categories too rigid, many of his ideas are valid, and his work became the forerunner for present day art criticism.

One of the categories Wölfflin defined is the linear style, or that which relies on line. The linear painter relies heavily on draftsmanship. Forms are clearly outlined, and not hazy along the edges.

Another of Wölfflin's categories is the painterly style. A painterly work is one in which outline is not stressed; rather, outline is one element of a whole that is based in movement and the interplay of elements such as light and shade. A painterly composition is first seen as a whole, with parts acting in such a way as to seem constantly changing, giving a dynamic feeling to the work.

Although some 20th-century works rely heavily on line, the tendency overall has been towards painterliness. However, up through the 19th century, concepts like "linear" and "painterly" provide a vocabulary with which to discuss painting, and a clue to the intent of the artist.

Space & the Use of Perspective

One can learn a great deal about a work of art when looking at it in terms of how the illusion of space is arranged. Is it voluminous and 3-dimensional? Or is it flat and 2-dimensional?

As solutions to artist's problems with space were developed, the nature of art greatly changed. Since art was first practiced, artists have grappled with the difficulty of depicting 3-dimensional objects on a flat, 2-dimensional surface, otherwise known as perspective.

Some cultures ignore the problem and take a symbolic approach to represent reality. Ancient Egyptian culture was not concerned with perspective or with visual realism. Medieval art often took a similar position, placing theological over physical truth. As one traces the development of art, the improvements in the methods of perspective are witnessed up until the Renaissance when it is perfected. Late in the 20th century, artists began to deny perspective as a means to break with prescribed rules and traditions.

Again, perspective is the method of representing a 3-dimensional object, or a particular volume of space, on a flat, 2-dimensional surface. The basic observations behind systems of perspectives are that objects in the distance appear smaller than object close to the viewer, and that parallel lines appear to meet in the far distance. Two common approaches used in artworks are linear and atmospheric perspective:

Linear perspective, the most common type, uses real or suggested lines converging on a vanishing point or points on the horizon or at eye-level, and linking receding planes as they do so. The easiest way to visualize linear perspective is to imagine yourself standing in between railroad tracks and looking off into the distance. As you look at the tracks, they seem to converge and meet at the end of the horizon. This is called the vanishing point.

Atmospheric perspective is a means of representing distance and recession in a painting based on the way the atmosphere affects the human eye. Outlines become less precise, small details are lost, hues become noticeably bluer, and colors in general become paler.

The term perspective refers to an entire scene, while perspective applied to a single object within a scene is called foreshortening. Foreshortening is the technique of depicting an object or figure at an angle to the picture plane by means of perspective. A foreshortened object is viewed as if it is extending from the picture plane. The picture plane is the imaginary plane represented by the physical surface of a painting – the canvas or paper, etc. It is the plane separating the imaginary space of a painting and the real space of the spectator.

Form

For purposes of art history, form refers to the shape of the object of art. In the made object, it is the shape that the expression of the content takes. To create form, artists must shape materials with tools. The technical process that an artist employs is known as technique.

The form of an object has much effect on the overall work. For example, a closed form can emit the sense of power and solidity, while an open form may suggest a sense of movement.

An open-form sculpture in which the figure's upper torso twists in one direction while the lower part twists in the opposite direction is said to employ a technique called contrapposto. Contrapposto was developed in the fifth century BC by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos as means to express the genuine movement of the human body.

Entrances & Exits

The contents of a painting are usually arranged so that they will be seen in a particular order. The viewer is drawn to the first focus of the painting, which then directs the eye toward other parts. The artist wants the viewer to be attracted to the work and to view it in the order that makes the most positive and lasting impression. Whether there is an easy flow through the work makes a profound difference in the impact of the work. Perspective, color, light, compositional arrangement and order are some visual elements that artists use to capture your eye.

The artist might also choose to include repoussoirs to direct your eyes. A repoussoir is an object or figure placed in the immediate foreground of a pictorial composition whose purpose it is to direct the viewer's eye into the picture. Generally, therefore, repoussoirs are placed towards the left- or right-hand edge of the composition.

LOOKING

Once you become familiar with the vocabulary you have now learned, you will be better equipped to observe, analyze and interpret an artwork in terms of its form and content. The more you practice this way of looking at art, the more comfortable you will be with it. Keep in mind that it is not always necessary to discuss all the factors listed below. Oftentimes, a particular segment may not apply to the artwork you are seeking to understand.

Now that you are armed with the vocabulary, it is time to start looking! Here is a good place to start:

- Visual elements within the artwork: What you see.
- Design of the artwork: How it is arranged.
- How the artwork was made: Technique and equipment used.
- What the artwork communicates: Feeling/mood.

These leading questions will help you learn how to look at artwork.

light	Does the light seem to be natural or artificial? Harsh or soft? From what direction is the light coming?
shadow	Do shadows affect the artwork's mood? Its composition? Shadows can play a significant role in how we observe an image.
value	Is there a range of tones from light to dark? Squint your eyes. Where is the darkest value? The lightest?
focus	What parts of the image are clearly in focus? Are some parts out of focus? In painting and photography, focus plays a role in defining the depth of field.
space	Is the space shallow, deep, or both? Do overlapping objects create a sense of space?
shape	Do you see geometric or organic shapes? Are there positive shapes, such as objects, or negative shapes that are defined by space between and around objects?
line	Are there thick, thin, curvy, jagged, or straight lines?
color	What colors do you see if any? If not, how would color affect the artwork? Would color change the mood?
texture	Do you see visual textures within the artwork?

- angle** From what vantage point was the image captured? Imagine it taken from a higher (bird's eye view) or lower (worm's eye view) angle or view. How does the angle affect the artwork?
- framing** Describe the edge of the image. What is included? What is not? Where are your eyes drawn? Can you imagine what might have been visible beyond the edges of the picture?
- dominance** Close your eyes. When you open them and look at the artwork, what is the first thing you notice? Why is your attention drawn there? Are there other centers of interest? How are they created? How do the focal points help move your eyes across the artwork?
- contrast** Are there strong visual contrasts – lights and darks varying textures, solids and voids, etc.?
- repetition** Repetition of visual elements can create unity – a sense of order or wholeness – that holds the work together visually. What elements are repeated? Do they contribute to a sense of unity?
- variety** Variety often creates interest. Can you see a variety of visual elements such as values, shapes, textures, etc.?
- balance** Is the visual weight on one side of the artwork about the same as the other? How about from top to bottom or diagonally?
- technique** What kind of tools did the artist use? Some painters applied paint directly to the canvas with their fingers. 17th-century Dutch artist, Jan Van Eyck often used a brush with only one bristle! How does the equipment used effect the overall work? Try to really think about how the work was made. You can learn a great deal about the piece by imagining how it would be to create it yourself. Better yet, give it a try!
- Feeling** Based on what you have seen, what do you think the work is about? What does it mean or communicate? What words would you use to describe it? How does it make you feel?

