

The Art of Seeing Art™



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VISUAL LITERACY

**VISUAL LITERACY
IS ALL ABOUT
UNDERSTANDING
WHAT YOU SEE.**

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[THE ART OF SEEING ART™](#)

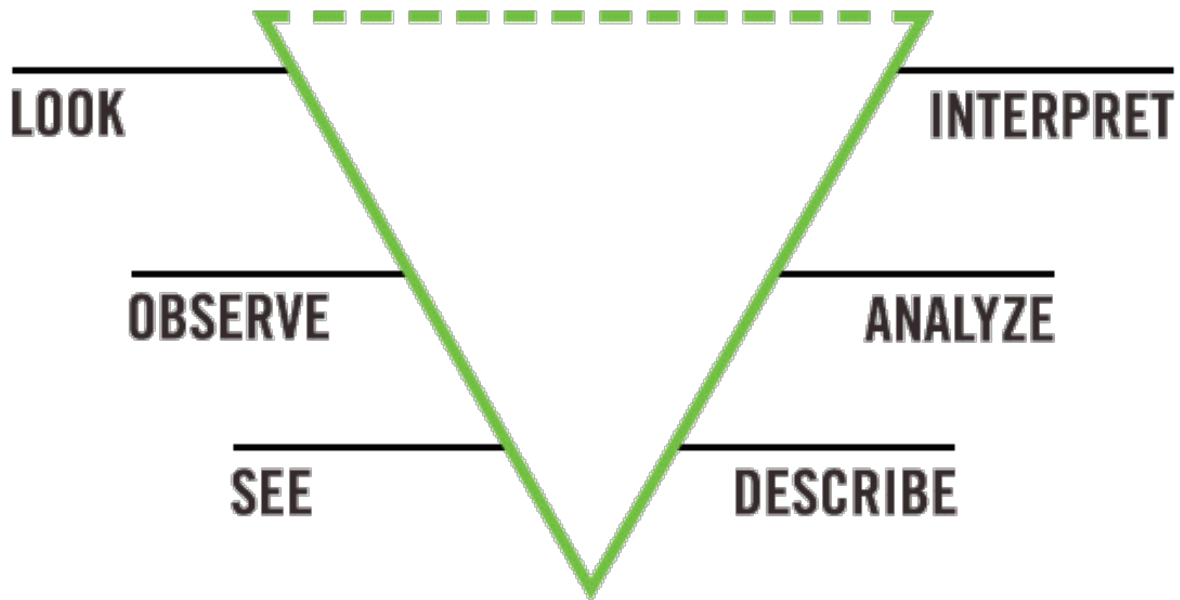
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The average person **spends 17 seconds** looking at a work of art in a museum. It usually takes much less time than that to identify an image. But understanding it? That requires slowing down and taking the time to see the details. This kind of thoughtful, close-looking helps us to see that things are not always as they appear at first glance.

The Art of Seeing Art™ is a process for looking carefully and exploring a work of art on a deeper level. Developed by the Toledo Museum of Art, The Art of Seeing Art™ is a series of six steps:

Look, Observe, See, Describe, Analyze, and Interpret—that you can use when looking at any work of art in the Museum's collection or any image in *everyday life*.

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SIX STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU SEE

LOOK

The first step in the Art of Seeing Art™ process, looking may seem pretty obvious. But it is so important that it is worth calling special attention to. Allow yourself to take the time to slow down and look carefully.

OBSERVE

Observation is where close looking comes into play. Observation is an active process, requiring both time and attention. It is here that the viewer begins to build up a mental catalogue of the image's visual elements.

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SEE

Looking is a physical act; seeing is a mental process of perception. Seeing involves recognizing or connecting the information the eyes take in with your previous knowledge and experiences in order to create meaning. This requires time and attention.

DESCRIBE

Describing can help you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you have seen. It may be helpful to think of describing as taking a careful inventory. What figures, objects and setting do you recognize?

ANALYZE

Analysis uses the details you identified in your descriptions and applies reason to make meaning. Analysis is also an opportunity to consider how the figures, objects and settings you identified in your description fit together to tell a story.

INTERPRET

Interpretation, the final step in the Art of Seeing Art™ process, combines our descriptions and analysis with our previous knowledge and any information we have about the artist and the work. Interpretation allows us to draw conclusions about the image.

Describe What You See

Describing can help you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you have seen. It may be helpful to think of describing as taking a careful inventory. What figures, objects and setting do you recognize? You can begin the process by identifying and describing the Elements of Art within a composition.

Think of describing as taking a careful inventory of what you see. To take "inventory" of an image, it's helpful to know the language used to describe works of art. The building blocks of formal language are the **Elements of Art** and **Principles of Design**.

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Elements of Art



COLOR



LINE



SHAPE



SPACE



TEXTURE

Principles of Design



BALANCE



EMPHASIS



HARMONY



MOVEMENT



PROPORTION



RHYTHM



UNITY



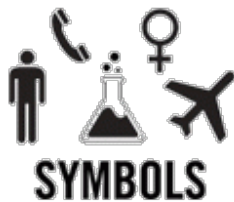
VARIETY

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Analyze

Analysis uses the details you identified in your description and applies reason to them in an effort to interpret the image. This is an opportunity to think about how the figures, objects, and settings fit together to tell a story.

There are different methods for analyzing an image - think of them like different pairs of glasses that help you critique a work of art from a particular point of view. Once details have been absorbed, an image is primed for analysis through four different lenses:



Form

Images convey meaning through the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design. Composition is the arrangement of the Elements of Art and Principles of Design.

Look at the placement of the fleur-de-lis shapes on the canvas. How does the pattern affect the way you perceive space and rhythm in the painting? How does the fleur-de-lis pattern interact with the other decorative pattern on the painting's surface? What meaning do you derive from the combination?

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Kehinde Wiley (American, born 1977), Saint Francis of Paola. Oil on canvas in artist's frame, 2003 Gift of Charles L. Borgmeyer, Mrs. Webster Plass, and C.W. Kraushaar, by exchange, 2005.290

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Symbols

Symbols—things that have meaning by association or that stand in for something else—are a powerful part of how we understand the visual world. We recognize symbols by calling on personal knowledge gained through memory and lived experience.

During the 1600s, a ship tossed on a stormy sea (seen here though the window) often symbolized the soul journeying through the hazards of life. The sun breaking through the clouds to highlight the church spire points to the path of salvation. The meal, therefore, may represent earthly temptations, which should only be enjoyed in moderation if the soul is to reach its destination safely.



Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Dutch, 1606–1684), Still Life with a View of the Sea. Oil on canvas, 1646. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1955.33

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Ideas

Culture and history influence how and what we see. Much of our reaction to an image depends on the context we see it in. What was the image-maker trying to convey and how does this relate to the time and place in which the image was created? Similarly, how do the values and beliefs of our own society shape our understanding of an image?

When TMA's version of *London Visitors* was unveiled at the Royal Academy in 1874, British critics took issue with the direct and unflinching gaze of the well-dressed woman. Her forthrightness, boldly meeting the eyes of the (conventionally male) viewer, flaunted the Victorian ideal of modest and unassuming womanhood. How do you read her gaze?

James-Jacques-Joseph Tissot (French, 1836–1902), London Visitors. Oil on canvas, about 1874. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1951.409



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Meaning

With the fourth method of analysis, we begin to understand the purpose of the artwork, discover the artist's intended meaning and expand on the number of other meanings based on the composition, memory, life experiences, history, culture, etc.



(Left) Ansel Adams (American, 1902–1984), Sunrise, Dunes, Death Valley National Monument. Gelatin-silver print, 1948. Purchased with funds given by an anonymous donor, 1975.3



(Right) Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883–1976), The Unmade Bed. Gelatin-silver print, 1957. Purchased with funds given by an anonymous donor, 1976.136

What similarities and differences do you see in the photos between the way the artists used formal qualities like line, shape, texture, movement, and rhythm? How does the use of value—the degree of lightness and darkness—make you feel about Cunningham’s image? Does it imply a mood or emotion? What about the subject itself—what does an unmade bed suggest to you? What do you think it meant to the artist or to a viewer in 1957 when the photo was taken?

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Interpretation

Interpretation occurs when we merge together the lenses of Form, Symbols, Ideas, and Meaning. Being visually literate or "speaking visual" means that you become aware of these factors and are able to challenge yourself to not only understand what you are seeing, but to ask yourself why you see it the way you do.

What does this painting depict?

1. An idyllic scene of golden fields of wheat
2. "An image of death as the great book nature speaks of it..."
3. A documentation of the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution
4. All of the above



Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853-1890), Wheat Field with Reaper, Auvers. Oil on canvas, 1890. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1935.4

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The answer? 4. All of the above.

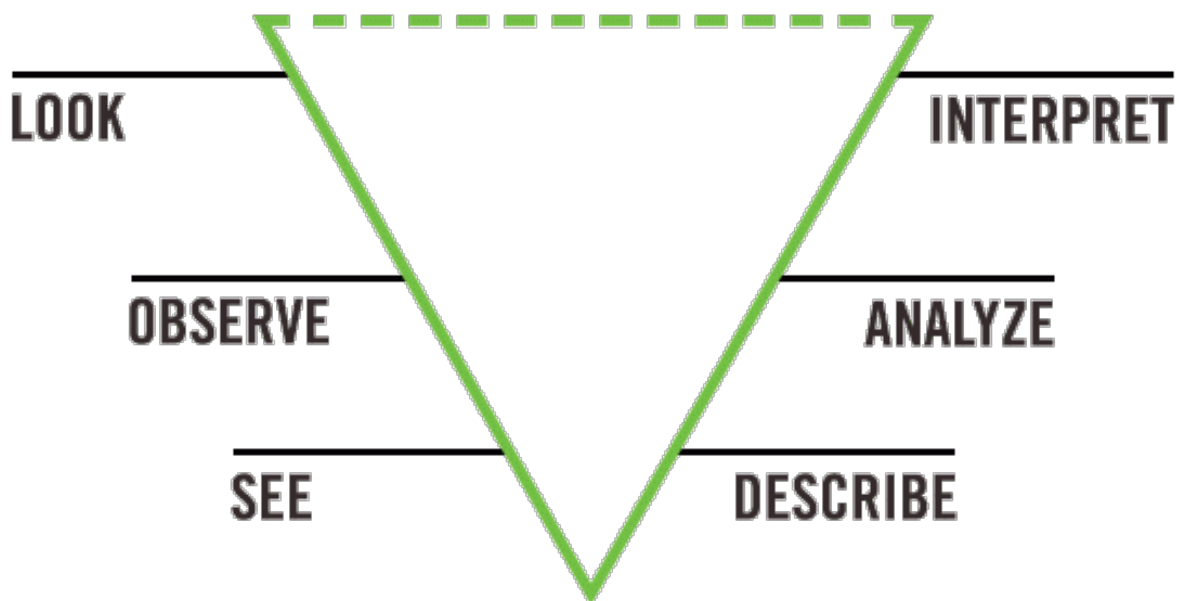
What did you first notice about Vincent van Gogh's Wheat Fields with Reaper? Maybe you were drawn to the bold, regular brush strokes or intrigued by the solitary reaper in the field. Perhaps your eyes were caught by the smoke billowing from the village in the distant blue hills. What do these details mean?

Though inspired by the observation of his immediate surroundings, van Gogh also saw symbolic meanings in the fields and in the figure of the reaper. Knowing van Gogh's intended meaning can influence your interpretation. This painting could mean something different to every person who views it depending on his or her memories, knowledge, and experiences; the society where he or she lives; or the location where it is viewed. How you understand this painting today may be different from how you understood it ten years ago and how you might understand it ten years from now.

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Are you familiar with the phrase "You never read the same book twice?" Future readings of a text will always be informed by earlier ones. This line of thinking is applicable to reading images. Let's look at the Art of Seeing Art™ diagram again:



Note the dotted line connecting **Interpret** to **Look**. While the shape of the diagram is a V, it is also cyclical. Interpretation leads back to the first act of looking. An object can never be interpreted the same way after it has been interpreted once.