

SIMPLE STEPS TO READING A PAINTING

"TAKING A VISUAL INVENTORY"

People all too often "read" a painting with only one set of tools, the first and automatic reaction or intuition about what a painting is trying to say or do. This reaction is, of course, an excellent gauge to first impression, but can often be the last impression as well, leaving the viewer with perhaps only a piece of the puzzle. The following exercise can be used to order your thoughts into a sequence that can be used for deeper interpretation.

I. DESCRIBE

This is the process of taking an inventory of the objects, incidents, or other visual information in a work of art. It can be a simple list compiled by a viewer or a group of viewers. The essential word here is what (with no interpretation or reaction from the viewer).

- What objects do I see?
- What incidents are represented?
- Have I identified all the parts of this work?

II. ANALYZE

This is a simple inventory that separates the visual components of the work of art into its parts. This inventory is a "formal" analysis of how the artistic elements were handled and organized by the artist. It is important that during the analyzing phase you do not venture into speculation or meaning.

COLOUR

Colour is used to help achieve many things. Colour can create the illusion of depth, achieve balance, and animate. Colours can have symbolic connotations and can promote emotional feelings. Colour can react to other colours and express different qualities of light.

- What colours are important to this work?
- Does colour lead your eye anywhere?
- Would the effect of this work be different if the colours were changed?
- What connotations, associations or symbolic meanings might the colours in this work have?

BALANCE

Balance is a principle of composition. It can be generally broken down into symmetrical or asymmetrical balance. Symmetry generally conveys a sense of order, while asymmetry usually expresses action, tension or movement. Of course the use of balance in context with the subject matter can further emphasize or offset the two generalizations.

- Is this image balanced, off balance, otherwise?
- Does the image lie within the canvas or go past the edges?
- What parts of the painting does the balance effect?

SPACE

Some paintings look flat, others have depth. Sometimes space is ambiguous. When there is an illusion of depth and breadth in a painting, it is often achieved by the depiction of overlapping planes, by using a "vanishing point" or by use of color and light.

- How do we travel through this painting?
- How deep does the space appear to be in this work?
- How is our eye drawn across the surface of the work?
- Is it slow, fast?
- Is it straight, diagonally, zigzag?

LINE

Lines can create rhythmic patterns and suggest movement, as well as define edges, create a three-dimensional effect (modeling), or otherwise evoke a response in a viewer.

- Are the lines in this work the same throughout?
- Are they thick, thin, ragged, smooth, controlled, etc.?

COMPOSITION

Composition is the overall arrangement of space. Form and color create a structure that can symbolize meaning in a work.

- What shapes are in this work?
- How are they arranged?
- How do they relate to one another?
- Did the artists paint things as they were seen, or were they distorted?

LIGHT AND CONTRAST

Like color, light helps create balance or a sense of space; it can animate and emphasize parts of a painting.

- Does the light in this work come from a source or is it ambient?
- Are the parts of the painting emphasized by light?
- Does the light seem to be painted as it was seen, or has the artist invented it?

TECHNIQUE

Technique is the way that the artist has chosen to use the materials of art making. The creation is through brushstroke, paint thickness, surface texture, etc

- Are the brushstrokes visible?
- If so, what do they look like?
- Are the marks and strokes the same everywhere?
- Is the manner of stroking slow and meticulous or have they been put on in a quick "painterly fashion"?
- Is there more paint in one place than another?

III. INTERPRET

This is the conscious and deliberate attempt to speculate about and articulate the meaning of a work of art based on the observations assembled as a result of description and analysis.

- What does everything in the painting add up to?
- What does it seem to mean?
- Have my feelings about this work changed as a result of the formal analysis?

IV. EVALUATE

Judgment about a work of art must be based on an informed opinion. Once you have really seen everything about the work of art, you are in a position to judge it. Ideally, judgment has nothing to do with personal preferences but it is based on the consideration as to the success of the work of the artist to achieve what he or she intended to express.

Judging a painting is a natural thing, and in most cases cannot be avoided. It is important to separate whether you like something or not versus whether it is successful in terms of the artist's intentions