



Visual Understanding in Education
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Writing for Adult Museum Visitors
(Draft)

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Like most aspects of museums, instructional programs are still an evolving phenomenon. To date, few practices are universally accepted, in part because there is neither consensus on the nature of audiences nor their needs and how to address them. For the last decade, however, much work has been done to arrive at more accurate, shared understandings of the people who visit museums, and what we can do to help them gain maximum enjoyment and benefit from their visits. This paper reflects such activity.

What follows is a summary of findings derived largely from research at The Museum of Modern Art, NY, during the 1980s (when I was Director of Education). Implications and conclusions are drawn from that data, and information from cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen has been added to create more complete understandings. Originally, we set out to determine what MoMA visitors knew about modern art and what patterns they employed when thinking about it, intending to let such understanding lead to a general guide for writing texts to assist our visitors. Further reflection led me to conclude that what applies to MoMA has applications to the situations of many museums. This paper contains background and guidelines for writing, as well as appendices with aesthetic stage information, two sample label texts, and some material regarding memory and novices prepared by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Background Research: initial efforts

In 1986 at MoMA, wanting to know what visitors knew about modern art, the Department of Education administered a “Visual Literacy Survey” to 150 randomly-selected individuals. This was a sample large enough to make valid assumptions about visitors in general according to the research firm we engaged to assist us. From this sample, we determined a number of things, including the facts that the majority of MoMA’s visitors:

- have rather narrow definitions of art, too narrow in fact to embrace much modern art;
- do not speak in the language of art criticism or history. They admit to minimal understandings of specialized vocabulary; when asked to talk about art, they often misuse stylistic terms and employ very little technical or analytical vocabulary;
- recognize *only* prominent artists’ work, and even then are significantly better at citing the author of a work if given a list of names from which to choose (ranging from Picasso and Matisse to Albers and Bearden), than if asked simply to identify the artists’ of works with no help;
- do not seem to know what it means to describe art, as if to someone absent, and have little to say when asked to interpret meaning;
- prefer work which has recognizable subject matter and/or which has received attention in popular culture; neither critical attention nor art world eminence necessarily led to appreciation--van Gogh, for instance, is appreciated by many; Pollock by relatively few;
- have minimal grasp of the concepts and premises underlying modern art;
- and have equally little conscious understanding of our ways to present it. For instance, they have little awareness that chronology, stylistic or media

groupings lie behind many installation and exhibition choices. They exhibit little ability to identify themes or to recognize their function as categories of organization. (*Data to support these generalizations is available through MoMA's Department of Education*).

Although these descriptions seem unfortunately negative, little of this is news to museum educators. The results of these studies articulate the effects of the marginal role of art--particularly modern and contemporary art--in our culture and educational systems. The depth of misunderstanding, however, might be surprising, and a bit disheartening. Knowing the magnitude of the problem does little to tell us how and where to begin compensating. Moreover, while the data confirms awareness among educators that many museum communications are over the heads of those whom we want to assist, those with the authority to change programs do not always agree with this assessment. We also have to face the fact that most museum visits are short, irregular, and infrequent, allowing us little time and opportunity to remediate if we decide to do so. What can we do differently to help our visitors enjoy what we find so meaningful?

Further Research: Housen's Theory of Aesthetic Development

To begin finding ways to help our audiences, information beyond that contained in the MoMA surveys was certainly needed, particularly so that we could understand the *strengths* of viewers, not simply their deficiencies. We then learned of the work of Abigail Housen (Ed.D., Harvard University), a cognitive psychologist with a deep interest in and knowledge of art.

Reasoning that all people with great expertise in art had at one point been beginners, Housen developed a research method allowing her to study how people of different levels of knowledge think. She wanted to see if there were any patterns that might help her understand differences of various skill levels, and to mark milestones on the pathway from beginner to expert. She conducted non directive interviews with hundreds of people of varied age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, education, location, experience, and expertise with art.

Through the collection and examination of a huge quantity of empirical data, Housen uncovered some distinct patterns of thinking based on different exposure to art. These patterns corresponded to the conclusions of other cognitive scientists who posit that all development takes place along a pathway--certain steps coming before others, as crawling comes before walking. Building on a developmental framework, then, she used the data she collected to unearth a "stage theory," a description of aesthetic development that explains and predicts behavior and change.

Housen's research indicates that understanding art is a process learned in distinct stages over time, like reading. Reading skills begin to develop when a child is very young, long before schooling enters in, and are marked by different interests, abilities and methods of instruction all along the way. Most of us have witnessed the moments when children begin to recognize letters, when they

begin to sound out words, and when they finally read with comprehension on their own. We need to recognize that visual learning is also a long, complicated process, which merits comparable systems to teach it. This process consists of devices designed to serve particular needs at a given time that eventually allow one to come to terms with complex visual structures.

Housen's five stages (see first appendix) help to explain that MoMA visitors aren't simply "ignorant"; they are at an early developmental stage, and therefore actually think differently from experts and have a different relationship to art. According to Housen, this relationship is nonetheless a strong connection to art. At the earliest stage, the relationship can be characterized as "storytelling"--that is, relating what one sees to one's recalled life experience through strings of short anecdotes. This process is satisfying to the Stage I viewer; entering a work through the lens of one's memories is the beginning of rapport and can be very rich. One of the satisfactions of Stage II is that it is filled with curiosity and eagerness to learn, and there is the capacity to devour art in the way that a young reader wants to read everything--books, signs, cereal boxes.

Both Stage I and II viewers respond to art subjectively. Neither sees through a framework of aesthetic or historical associations. At Stage I, people are unquestioning about what they find and are basically unaware of their limitations. They simply dismiss what they don't immediately understand. In general, they respond quickly and idiosyncratically, with scant attention to any issue beyond what is obvious to them. Such behaviors are easy to recognize in children, but they are also typical of adults (many tourists, for example) who have had little exposure to art.

At Stage II, however, people begin to distrust their own abilities. Except with realistic art about which they feel comfortable, they become confounded by what they don't fathom and are often provoked to ask, "Why is this art?" In the absence of the more knowledgeable viewer's systems of analysis, they apply traditional values to looking at art. Those derived from the "Protestant work ethic" (e.g., believing that good things take time, hard work, and a fair measure of talent; or that good art lives up to conventional notions of beauty and propriety) are particularly common. If these expectations are challenged, some Stage II viewers become hostile; think of members of Congress. The more tractable often realize that others recognize value in challenging work which they themselves do not perceive, and they want to learn to make informed judgments of such art on their own.

Stage II viewers appreciate information and explanations, but they truly desire to know for themselves, and often undertake to learn. We help them most if we bring them along an arc of learning, comparable to the way reading teachers help the incipient reader confront first language and punctuation, then over time character, plot, structure, symbols and so on. Such teachers don't explain books or authors, they help the reader actively explore first the mechanics of reading, and finally ways of analyzing and comprehending at deeper levels. Think of what it takes to learn another language; it is seldom a

process of memorization alone and virtually never a passive matter. In museums when we instruct beginning viewers using fact-based labels and lectures, we hand people who have adequate “menu French” much more complex statements than they can actually assimilate, and expect them to join in the process of fluent people.

One problem in assessing museum audiences stems, ironically, from the fact that they are intelligent and generally well educated. It would not be unlikely to find adult museum visitors conversant, for example, with the ideas of Jung. Why, then, cannot we simply talk about how psychology works its way into Pollock’s methods and meanings? The fact is that we can, and on some level they might get what we are talking about. But while their education brought them step-by-step to some kind of understanding of Jung (often vague, to be sure), there was no such initiation into understanding complex ideas expressed in color and line. No one has helped them probe a painting’s “text” for visual metaphors. In fact they may be unaware that there are such things as visual analogues for intellectual concepts.

Most devices used by museums to “educate” provide context-setting information to assist the viewer, or contain explanations of why something looks as it does, believing that this is what is wanted and needed. Given this, viewers become passive. Moreover, the real pleasure and need of beginning viewers in discovering things by and for themselves is denied them. There is also little evidence that the information thus received is remembered. Most important, we imply that the acquisition of information is equal to real “knowing,” which is in fact a far more complicated amalgam of emotions and intellect.

The main goal of communications for general visitor should be to assist them to examine art and think for themselves. We should initiate an active process that is cumulative and eventually results in people capable of finding meaning in the things they see. If grounded in this way, they are likely to be curious--the precondition for remembering--and equipped to learn more. Our secondary goal is to enhance viewers knowledge base, which will be effective to the degree that it conforms to their abilities and interests. In other words, the information and concepts presented must be the kinds that “stick,” as Housen puts it.

Knowledge of the way beginning viewers think--such as supplied by Housen--gives a good, positive and solid footing for instruction that serves their present needs and interests. Knowing what is likely to happen next, developmentally, allows for creating appropriate ways of challenging them, and also assessing their progress.

A Guide to Writing

Generous samplings of audiences in many museums (using Housen’s non directive interview) indicate that children are, with rare exception, in Stage I, and most adult visitors are within the boundaries of Housen’s Stage II, with a significant minority in a transition stage between Stages II and III. It is only

among the latter that we see thinking that resembles that of experts, although the MoMA studies indicate that even such people still have a shaky command of information and a superficial comprehension of strategies applied by experts to find meaning in unfamiliar work. Stylistic or formal analysis and thinking about context and technique as contributing to meaning still do not enter into the pattern of this viewer. They can grasp the concepts involved, but not use them, not really “own” them.

According to additional surveys at MoMA done in the early and mid ‘80s, a large sampling of visitors clearly stated that among the many choices--from gallery talks to audio and audiovisual devices--labels (i.e., explanatory texts mounted on walls) are its preferred means of education within a museum. From the numbers taken, it also appears that most exhibition goers avail themselves of a brochure if one is prominently displayed, although MoMA research data make it clear that few read them while in the museum--hardly ever before or while looking at the art referred to. Nevertheless, these devices are museums’ primary means of communicating on-the-spot with those who want and need assistance.

In thinking about writing such texts, it might be helpful to recall the opening page of a script which lists each of the characters in a play with thumbnail descriptions of age, personality, and character. Notes will also sketch the era, time of day, and setting, all as ways of placing the reader correctly for beginning the story. Through a label, we can help people create a mental picture or concept (preferably one that they are enticed to “prove” by their own examination of the work at hand) which sets the stage for them to enter the picture, secure that what they know is enough to get started, looking with some insight at the “main characters,” “setting,” and other details which lead quickly to engagement with the “plot” (what the piece is about) and perhaps some intentions of the artist.

Ideally, all works on permanent display (and at least key works in special exhibitions), have an accompanying text. If we must choose among available objects, select ones that are

- conspicuously displayed,
- likely to be attractive to Stage II viewers--ones with a fair degree of naturalistic depiction; “human interest” elements within the subject including narrative, activity, and emotional states; traditional values and aesthetics; cultural diversity; or, conversely
- likely to befuddle, such as abstractions, macabre, violent or unconventional subjects, or highly conceptual works.

Use the former images to ease viewers into a position of openness in regard to the more challenging latter ones. The mere acceptance of this kind of object as “good art” makes it easier for the viewer to enter the work, and we can take advantage of this positive attitude to focus their looking in, for example, an analytical manner.

When the art in an exhibition is “difficult” (e.g., works by Ad Reinhardt, Robert Colescott, or Sherry Levine), the minimal intercession represented by labels and brochures hardly seems adequate to our audiences’ needs. But through sensitive choices of what idea(s) to try to get across, how to direct the viewer’s eyes around the work, and how to cast the text in terms of language, we can, at the very least, anticipate some questions and allay some anxiety and even hostility. In such instances, the basic questions of “why is this art?” or “why do the people who work in art museums take this seriously?” must be addressed if we expect our viewers to embrace its validity.

Helping our visitors is not always a matter of deciding what *more* they need to know in order to appreciate something, but sensitively assessing what they *already* know that provides the basis for new understandings. What are viewers likely to bring to their first mediated meetings with Warhol, Agnes Martin, or Elizabeth Murray? What kind of experience can we help them draw on to use as a bridge to what they don’t know? What might they already know that we help them call into consciousness to start them in a productive direction?

To address the viewer’s questions concerning “difficult art,” including art from cultures likely to be unfamiliar to the viewer (e.g., many kinds of religious art), the text should focus on the intentions of the maker: “Why would someone make something like this?” One label, for example, might deal with what prompted Reinhardt to paint with only one color: “Many of the artists who eventually painted abstractions began looking at the physical world, but gradually let it fall away, turning, for example, landscapes in to patterns of colors and shapes. Later artists began by looking at these paintings for inspiration, not the world at all, and some, as you can see in Reinhardt, chose to eliminate all but a single color....” Another may discuss how he chose blue, black, or red. To write a Colescott label, the writer might ask what is it that helps one understand why he paints caricatures of African American people: “Some artists--the so-called Pop Artists--draw on things they see in every day life (soup cans, signs, comics and so forth) and use them as the subjects of their art. Colescott focuses on the way African Americans have been caricatured in popular media over the years which you can see in this painting.....” Identifying key elements of symbols or iconography is appropriate, and again context will be appreciated: “The figure of Shiva--Hindu god of destruction and regeneration--is depicted here. As usual, he is shown with four arms, the additional set symbolizing...”

What one is looking for here is “basics”--whether a tiny historical overview, an analogy, or the simplest of facts. They must be “true” and faithful to history and knowledge, but they also must be concise, pointed, few in number, written in commonly understood language, and direct the viewer to the work itself. In instances where biographical, historical, or technical data seems absolutely essential, we should select information that addresses obvious questions and again encourages looking: knowing these facts will help people see, will often direct them to look at the work in question. It will be remembered better if it is presented in a narrative style, not as a list of facts.

It is often helpful to envision a specific person--a relative, or a friend who is interested, but somewhat put off by art--and keep them in mind as one writes. This way we can remain grounded in and respectful of the reality of the people we are writing for. Several tests of any draft, best applied a day or so after it is written, are to ask,

- "So what?" Does what I have written have inherent value? Does it contribute to finding meaning? Does it help viewers see this work in a light *they* can appreciate?
- Does it fairly represent what the artist was trying to say?
- Does it assist the viewer learn more about the process of looking? Does it take them a bit of the way down the road to self sufficient viewing?

Here are some specific, practical suggestions to guide the writing process, not a formula but principles:

Regarding content

- When introducing a subject (or a new sub-section of a brochure) begin with a topic sentence which states why the art or exhibition is "important"--why it is on view, why we take the artist seriously, for example. Remember that we may talk about van Gogh in more sophisticated ways than when speaking of Pollock simply because of people's acceptance of van Gogh and the artistic values he represents. We can start with symbol, brushstroke, and intention with van Gogh, where as we are wise to start with "why art" with Pollock.
- In cases of "difficult art," create frames of reference by way of analogies: since people are searching for values that justify what they see, call their attention to a familiar or popular phenomenon which might shed light on what bewilders them. For example, to help make sense of a minimalist piece, refer to the notion of clearing away all but the essentials, as when meditating.
- After the initial "why" is set up, then follow with two or three sentences which direct the viewer to see how a work contains evidence of what has been suggested. Point to subject choices, visual elements, and/or techniques which support your opening claim. These directions should be sequenced, working from the obvious to the subtle, from central issues to details.
- Ask questions that can be answered by a viewer with limited experience ("What associations do you have with the color black? White? The two together?") or activities ("Look around the room at other pictures...") to encourage him/her to become active. Be extra careful not to be coy, silly, or rhetorical.
- Conclude with an overview--what one might surmise from all of the above. Another analogy can be helpful here, too. Be careful to leave matters open-ended, however, encouraging viewers to think that there is more to see and think about.
- Additional: use quotations by the artist or other credible authority (another famous artist or the organizer of the exhibition, if identified, are possibilities) to address motivations and intentions. In some instances, provide minimal biographical or historical notes, chosen to "set the stage," but do not burden them with unmemorable facts. Refer them to other works of art which may illuminate issues further.

Writing style

- Write intelligently; our audience's problem is inexperience in dealing with art, not lack of intelligence or education. For a model, think about good journalism, the kind found in newspapers and magazines that we--and very likely our viewers--read.
- Think about how you like to be introduced to a subject with which you are not familiar. Again look at ways journalists in magazines you enjoy help you become interested in and informed about a topic about which you are not on secure footing. See also how effective manuals approach new equipment; and check for the opposite, off-putting effect as well.
- Write in the active voice, and use directions: look at...note...find...see. This is called "directed looking."
- Present ideas, "directed looking," and information in a logical order, one where one bit builds on another. Brochures may follow a logic from beginning to end, but do not assume that people in galleries look at all images or read all texts, or that they read them in a desired sequence. Each entry--and wall texts as well--should be self contained.
- Avoid sentences with qualifying words and clauses. Use short sentences that contain no more than one idea. Density leads to confusion, no matter how efficient or stylistically appealing it seems. In addition, short sentences are easier to scan--which is how our visitors are likely to read our texts.
- Use punctuation to help give the viewer mental breathing space.

Language

- Write in commonly understood language to make our points stick. Assume that our audiences understand no trade jargon, technical terms, or even conceptual references such as "balance" and such notions as "brushstroke." The MoMA literacy research as well as Housen interviews show that even these words are not understood as used in discussions of art.
- If you think that specific vocabulary is necessary, teach people the word by defining it, by making clear its meaning in context, or by directed looking. Be thoughtful, not patronizing; this is one place thinking about someone you care about and want to involve in your world will be helpful.

Length

- It is generally preferable to keep all writing for on-site reading brief. Think of "entries" not "essays." Brief, however, is a relative matter: wall texts must be shorter than brochure copy, for example. There is no magic number of words, although studies at various museums cite that staying well below 100 words for labels and 150 per entry for brochures is desirable. (The length of this and the next paragraph together is ninety-seven words).
- Please note: MoMA visitors told us that that if they are engaged by content and presentation, they will read longer statements.

Design and layout

- Legibility is very important in design. Large, easy-to-read typefaces are especially appreciated by the over-forty audience (a large percentage of our viewers), but it helps all viewers to think that their comfort is an issue.
- The color of the type and the color of the paper should contrast, but not harshly. This is an area of frequent conflict between educators and exhibition designers, including curators. However, putting up a hard-to-read label is probably worse than putting up none at all. When a wall text is discouraged because of the nature of the art or the installation, use a brochure instead. In that case, however, make sure that it is especially appealing and accessible; consider creating a place where people might comfortably sit and read it before going into the galleries.
- Narrow columns are much easier to read than wide ones--think of the design of newspapers and magazines again, which are usually designed to help the viewer read quickly, yet productively, through text.
- Remember that crowds tend to gather around introductory texts. Consider this when siting and sizing them.
- Visitors have told us that they prefer the design of a brochure to reflect content. In other words, if there is humor in the work discussed, a suitably parallel design will be appreciated.

Appendix A Stages of Aesthetic Development

Stage 1

Accountive viewers are storytellers. Using their senses and personal associations, they make concrete observations about the work of art which get 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 the unfolding narrative.

Stage 2

Constructive viewers set about 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 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 themes of motherhood have been transposed into wars on sexuality--then this viewer judges the work to be "weird," lacking, and of no value. As emotions begin to go underground, this viewer begins to distance him or herself from the work of art and develops an interest in the artist's intentions.

Stage 3

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 surface of the canvas for clues using their vast library of acts and figures. Properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

Stage 4

Interpretive viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the canvas, letting the meaning of the work slowly unfold, they appreciate the subtleties of line and shape and color. Now, critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let the meaning of the work--its symbols--emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

Stage 5

Re-creative viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now "willingly suspend disbelief." A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, needing attention on a daily level as well as on an elevated plane. As in all important friendships, time is a key ingredient. Knowing the ecology of the work--its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with the work in particular, and with viewing in general allows this viewer to combine a more personal contemplation with one which more broadly encompasses universal

concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

Significant to understanding aesthetic development is that while growth is *related* to age, it is not determined by it; in other words, a person of any age with no experience with art will perforce be in Stage I. An adult will not be at a higher stage than a child simply by virtue of age. Exposure to art over time is the only way to develop, and without both art and time, aesthetic development won't occur.

Appendix B **Two sample labels**

Vincent van Gogh. The Starry Night, 1889.

In The Starry Night, van Gogh painted a night sky with an outburst of color and form. "Real artists," he once wrote, "paint things not as they are, in a dry analytical way, but as they feel them... 'untrue' if you like, but more true than literal truth."

As you can see, lights are burning inside houses that are dwarfed beneath a tumultuous sky. Van Gogh boldly outlines the mountain tops. Their curves are first echoed, and then exaggerated, by shorter dashes of paint above them. The light thus rolls like waves over the hills. The moon burns as radiantly as the sun, and stars explode like fireworks. Note how earth and sky are connected by powerful, flame-like cypress trees, and by a church steeple off in the distance. The town creates a dark, horizontal resting place for the turbulent night sky.

Painting in broad broken lines, van Gogh said he "unlocked valves of feeling." His reality describes nature as charged with energy, and perhaps with spirit as well.

Note: as a wall text, the first paragraph and the last might stand alone. A brochure might use all three.

Jackson Pollock. One (Number 31, 1950)

Spend a little time looking at One both from a distance and up close. From this, you can see that Pollock built up a network of lines and masses, and that the painting is much more complicated than it seems at first.

Pollock is admired for refusing to be limited by traditional painting techniques--using brushes on canvases which rest on easels. He laid his canvas directly on the ground to be able to lean into it from all sides, wanting to be "in the painting," as he said. Painting to him was an athletic act. He slowly, painstakingly learned how to control the effects of throwing, splattering, and dripping different kinds and consistencies of paint.

With abstract paintings, artists give us starting points, a kind of outline for us to interpret. Thinking about each element we observe--colors, lines, interactions--

our imaginations can explore various possible meanings. What does Pollock mean to say with this kind of energetic painting? We might use his title--One--as a clue. Painted shortly after World War II, could he want to talk of the world's interconnectedness? Of new beginnings?

Note: as a wall text, the first and final paragraphs might suffice. A brochure might contain the entire block.