



Visual Thinking Strategies™

Chapter 21

Art Viewing and Aesthetic Development: Designing for the Viewer

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Visual Understanding in Education

My work began with this: how could viewing art make some uncomfortable, others bored or edgy, and still others animated and excited? Fascinated by these distinctive reactions, I wanted to know more about what I would later call aesthetic development. How do people experience art? What goes on in their minds as they stand in front of a painting? What goes on over their lifetimes as they stand again and again in front of many paintings?

From a pedagogical point of view, I wanted to know what aesthetic skills are developed in looking at a work of art. What causes such development? I decided that only by understanding viewing from the viewer's perspective could I understand how to support and nurture and, finally, foster aesthetic growth. Initially, I developed a research method to measure the art-viewing experience. Then, after years of teaching and research, I collaborated with Philip Yenawine to create educational practices that help learners move to new levels of

Stages of Aesthetic Development

In the 1970s, I demonstrated that, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic background, viewers understand works of art in predictable patterns that I call “stages.” My research showed that we process artwork in a sequence of these stages (Housen, 1983). In the ensuing decades, I, with my colleague Karin DeSantis, demonstrated this fact in research studies where we showed that, if exposed to a carefully sequenced series of artworks, viewers’ ways of interpreting images would evolve in a predictable manner. We also found that given certain key elements in the design of aesthetic encounters, growth in critical and creative thinking accompanied growth in aesthetic thought. In other words, in the process of looking at and talking about art, the viewer is developing skills not ordinarily associated with art. These findings were consistent over a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Housen, 1992a, 2000, 2002; Housen, DeSantis, & Duke, 1997).

When viewers talk—in a stream-of-consciousness monologue—about an image, and every idea, association, pause, and observation is transcribed and analyzed, the different stages become apparent. Each aesthetic stage is characterized by a knowable set of interrelated attributes. Each stage has its own particular, even idiosyncratic, way of making sense of the image. I review them here.⁴

Stage I

At *Stage I, Accountive*, viewers are listmakers and storytellers. They make simple, concrete, observations:

Lines, ovals, squares ... (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

⁴ All quotes appearing here are taken from aesthetic development interviews we conducted over 18 years. Aesthetic Development Interviews are nondirective, stream-of-consciousness-type interviews (Housen, 1983).

At times, the Stage I viewer makes observations and associations that appear idiosyncratic and imaginative:

[A] giraffe's back ... a dog's face. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

Likewise, the Stage I viewer may incorporate people and objects into an idiosyncratic narrative:

I see two ladies, holding each other. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

It seems to me he's going home now, and he can't find his clothes. (Cezanne, *Bather*)

Judgments are based on what the viewer knows

and likes: The wallpaper is beautiful. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

Emotions color the comments, as the Stage I viewer animates the image with words and becomes part of an unfolding drama:

... Like he's hurt [his arms] when he was swimming or like he was mad or something the way he was holding his arms. (Cezanne, *Bather*)

The Stage I viewer (the "storyteller") and the image (the "story") are one. The viewer engages in an imaginatively resourceful, autonomous, and aesthetic response.

Stage II

At *Stage II, Constructive*, viewers set about building a framework for looking at art, using the most accessible tools at hand: their perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social and moral world. Observations have a concrete, known reference point:

And they have five fingers, just like us. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

If the work does not look the way it is "supposed to"—if skill, hard work, utility, and realism are not evident (the tree is orange instead of brown), or if the subject seems inappropriate (if themes of motherhood are transposed into themes about sexuality)—the Stage II viewer judges the work to be "weird" and lacking in value:

The hair on the first person is blond, and it is true, but there is no such thing as a purple face. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

As this viewer strives to map what she sees onto what she knows from her own conventions, values, and beliefs, her observations and associations become more linked and detailed. The viewer looks carefully and puzzles. An interest in the artist's intentions develops:

The person has chosen, instead of using circles for the background, he used lots of diamonds. (Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*)

Emotions begin to go underground, and the Stage II viewer begins to distance herself from the work of art.

Stage III

At *Stage III, Classifying*, the viewer adopts the analytical stance of the art historian. Studying the conventions and canons of art history, she wants to identify the work as to school, style, time, and provenance. The Stage III viewer wants to know all that can be known about the artist's life and work, from when and where an artist lived to how the work is viewed in the panoply of artists:

I guess how much this resembles primitive art in a sense because the figures are flat and representational, and yet they're nudes which were sort of an 18th-century, 19th-century preoccupation, and yet [it] foreshadows modern art.

(Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*)

The Stage III viewer searches the surface of the canvas for clues, using his library of facts, which he is eager to expand. His chain of information becomes increasingly complex and multilayered:

It seems to me that this is one of a number of Picassos that really is very indicative of ... two of his styles that are blending, this sort of monumental style of female drawing and the later Cubist style which you see entering into it ... (Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*)

This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

Stage IV

In *Stage IV, Interpretive*, viewers seek an interactive and spontaneous encounter with a work of art:

I don't think that [drawing the ideal human form] was what he really had in mind as being that important, so maybe he de-emphasized some of the features, abstracted more because he was looking for us to look at other things—she does seem to be having some trouble with her reach, closing that circle, so that adds a little stress to the picture, that's nice, it gives you so much to think about. (Matisse, *Dance*) Exploring the canvas, letting the meaning of the work slowly unfold, the Stage IV viewer appreciates formal subtleties. She unwraps methods and

processes in a new way, discovers new themes in a familiar composition, and distinguishes subtle comparisons and contradictions: It also reminds me of, I mean, I can imagine like the suffragettes of the time just thinking this painting was so terrific. ... I don't know this, this is just an assumption of mine, but I think they would really, like, take it in, and like want it to be theirs as well, like the strength, the unity of women, sort of helping and nurturing each other in a way, sort of leading each other on a path. (Matisse, *Dance*)

Critical skills are put in service of feelings and intuitions, as the Stage IV viewer lets the meaning of the work—its symbols—emerge. Each new encounter presents a chance for new insights and experiences, and with each new “aha” comes a new engagement:

And it's not perfect, there's like a humanity in this piece that speaks very clearly because of that irregularity in the line and the size, the proportion of each, which I'm sure means other things as well but really speak to me. (Matisse, *Dance*) Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, this viewer trusts his own processes, which are knowingly subject to chance and change.

Stage V

At Stage V, *Re-Creative*, viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about art, now willingly suspend belief (as described by Coleridge, 1817). The work of art is not just paper and paint. The viewer sees the object as semblant, real, and animated with a life of its own:

The more I look at the painting, the more I have this sense of the sexuality as being a kind of pressure that pushes away from the canvas but in some ways is tightly held by the canvas itself. (Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*)

The Stage V viewer begins an imaginative contemplation of the work (Baldwin, 1975). Transcending prior knowledge and experience, this viewer gives himself permission to encounter the artwork with a childlike openness. A trained eye, critical stance, and responsive attitude are his lenses as the multifaceted experience of the artwork guides his viewing. A familiar painting is like an old friend, known intimately yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level, but also existing on a more elevated plane:

I think just the freshness of it just keeps coming through continuously, even though it's quite an old painting at this point, it still seems very new to me." (Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*)

Drawing on their own history with the work in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine personal, playful contemplation with one more

broadly encompassing and reflecting universal concerns. As with important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing the Stage V viewer to closely know the biography of the work: its history, questions, intricacies, and ecology. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

There are preliminary drawings for this painting which incorporated a sailor and a doctor, I believe, standing to the side and pulling back a curtain and seeing the interior ... and the idea that Picasso eliminated those male figures and just presented the painting directly to the viewer, almost asking the viewer to be in that position seemed to be a very interesting change in the thinking about art. (Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*).

Educational Implications of Aesthetic Stages

Listening to the wonderful complexity of viewers' remarks at each stage, it becomes understandable that their particular ways of processing—their stages—must be taken into account if we are to design effective educational experiences. Having a detailed map of aesthetic stages is a useful tool in this endeavor, for it enables us to select images based on our understanding of viewers' interests and needs at each stage. To begin with, our goal becomes

clear: to design programs that foster aesthetic development in a measurable way (Housen & Yenawine, 2000a, 2000b, 2001b, 2002).

To be more specific about curricula, the following discussion describes learning environments for Stages I through IV. For the first two stages (I and II), I cite questions used in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen & Yenawine, P. 2000a, 2000b, 2001b, 2002), a curriculum designed for beginner viewers. For Stages III and IV, I discuss the issues and questions central to learning environments for these stages. I do this even though we have found that VTS (the curriculum for Stages I and II) can be successfully and effectively used with all ages and levels, provided that the images are chosen appropriately (Yenawine, 2003).

“What is going on in this picture?” (Housen & Yenawine, 2001a)—the central question for Stage I viewers—is the first question we use in VTS. Although this question works for all stages, it emerges from the beginner viewer, who is asking, “What is happening in this image?” By using the active phrase, “is going on,” we encourage beginners to do what they do naturally: enter into the picture and then create a list or tell a story. This question actively supports the viewer by keeping attention on the picture—“Eyes on the canvas!”—a pivotal step in art viewing. When a group of beginner viewers responds to this question, everyone

starts looking longer and more intently, discovering new details, and listening to multiple points of view.

To keep a group of beginner viewers (Stages I and II) focused on the image, the next question, “What do you see that makes you say that?” (Housen & Yenawine, 2001a), asks that viewers to support their interpretative comments.

This question concentrates the group discussion on the image, prompting everyone to look longer and harder, see more complexly, interact with one another, and revise and expand their initial interpretations. Viewers learn to reason by citing evidence found in the image. A third question—“What more can you find?”—recharges the process of looking and ensures that the group continues to look intensely, finding that the more they look, the more they see and that there can be more than one right answer.

Stage II viewers’ central questions concern the way the image looks and how it was made; questions about technique and skill mix with ones about artistic choice and values. VTS images are selected that meet viewers where they are, as well as challenge them to explore new subjects and pursue incipient questions. As Stage II viewers begin to be aware of a body of information unknown to them, the images they view allow them to feel comfortable, while at the same time stretching them to look at new things and to voice their

thoughts. If the viewers value good draftsmanship and Cezanne's painting of his son does not look well rendered to their eyes, the VTS question "What do you see that makes you say that?" (Housen & Yenawine, 2001 a) will lead the viewers to hear and consider different points of view. They begin to see that there can be paradoxes. The discussion provides a safe arena to think about why someone else—in this case, the artist—may have chosen to paint in a particular way. In time, the Stage II viewer arrives at the concept of intentionality as he or she considers that marks left on the canvas, which might at first look like carelessness or mistakes, were intentionally left there by the artist. With more viewing experience, more complex, less narrative images are introduced, drawing the Stage II viewer further from his or her native preconceptions and deeper into the work of art (Yenawine, 2003).

Stage III viewers are interested in gathering and categorizing information about works of art and artists, styles and schools, methods and techniques. With careful looking, discussion, and independent reading, Stage III viewers accumulate that sought-after information. As Stage III viewers deepen their study and encounter unexpected juxtapositions of images, they uncover and then must grapple with the shifting classifications of their recently acquired theories. Discussions drawing on themes like the misidentification and reclassification of masterpieces, fakes, overlapping styles of artists—issues

that soften the distinctions among art historical categories—challenge Stage III viewers to build on, and go beyond, what they know and how they know it. Such challenges demand that the Stage III learner re-engage in a deeper and more complex observation of the object. Discussions encouraging learners to consider different pieces of information about one art object challenge the Stage III viewer to confront a multiplicity of viewpoints, deepen personal insights, and to uncover and take ownership of one's own point of view.

Stage IV viewers bring complex and nuanced personal sensibilities, experiences, and insights to art viewing. Programs intended for them will be open-ended, perhaps starting with a problem, a theme, or an inquiry. As prominent participants in any discussion, they easily share their evolving insights and discoveries. Stage IV viewers thrive on the ongoing, changing, and ever-expanding experience of interacting with art. These viewers enjoy the moment-to-moment process of viewing, whether it is unexpected contrasts and comparisons, a surprising mix of media or disciplines, or unlimited access to one image. They are open to new conclusions reached in the moment.

Openness to multiple voices and points of view allows Stage IV viewers to see the image through many perspectives simultaneously and to weave together many levels of viewing.

The Implication of Stages in Effective Pedagogical Design

Aesthetic stage research offers salient insights into when and how learning takes place. First, a viewer's thinking is characterized by a spectrum of thoughts, with those of one stage intermingled with adjacent stages. In other words, a range within a developmental architecture, not a single point, best represents each learner. Identifying the precise developmental level of each learner is less important than successfully estimating the general level of the group. In Visual Understanding in Education's (VUE) curriculum, this means the teacher does not have to know the exact stage of each viewer. As long as the most prevalent stage can be estimated, engagement in learning predictably takes place (Housen, 2000, 2001).

Second, stages are characterized by core questions in the viewer's mind. Therefore, as long as we understand what these questions are and develop experiences that allow the learner to grapple with those questions directly, development will occur. In other words, honoring the underlying developmental currents of the target population leads to pedagogical success. Within VUE's curriculum, the aesthetic development measurement system (Housen, 1983, 1992b, 2000) helps map in detail the questions learners face at different stages. This enables curriculum design that tracks with the questions of each population, increasing the incidence of growth.

Third, to design powerful developmental experiences, we need to track how thinking patterns shift from one stage to the next. In other words, we must understand the shape of the next developmental milestone of our population and target curricular experiences towards that turning point. When creating VUE programs, we use stage data to characterize shifts and then use this understanding to design proximal experiences (Housen & DeSantis, 2000, 2001, 2002; DeSantis, 2000). These new challenges require more hard-looking and reflection on the part of the learner, and yet each learner is supported by pedagogical scaffolds that bridge current needs with newly emerging questions and interests (Vygotsky, 1978). In this process of discovery, each new learner creates a dynamic tension as he or she chooses issues, constructs arguments, owns what he or she knows, discards the rest, and becomes ready for a new set of challenges. Education is about providing a taste of the next, proximal way of thinking. Exercises that are rooted in the logic of each side—old and new—promote growth most effectively.

Summary

My journey into the aesthetic experience led me deep into the world of the viewer, effectively undertaking—although I didn't realize it at the outset—an empirical exploration of developmental theory. The “road map” that grew out of my examination of aesthetic thought and growth, combined with an applied

understanding of constructivist learning theory (Brown, 1992, Bruner, 1966; Kuhn, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978), guided our iterative decisions and enabled us to construct curricula that capitalize on the essential tenets of developmental theory.

In practical terms, we found that the most effective experiences for stimulating aesthetic development are question-based, give the learner repeated opportunity to construct meaning from different points of view, take place in an environment that supports looking in new and meaningful ways, and are inspired by rich, varied, and carefully chosen works of art.

Implementing such a curriculum opens a number of opportunities for the teacher, the learner, and the subject. The teacher's role is not so much to impart facts, or manage drill and practice, but to facilitate the learner's process of discovery. The teacher enables development by creating and managing a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to discover new ways to find answers to their own questions, to construct meaning, to experience, and to reason about what they see. The act of constructing meaning cannot be something taught; the learner must discover his meaning on his own.

Within VUE's curriculum (Housen & Yenawine, 2000a, 2000b, 2001b, 2002), teachers encourage student participation and the sharing of each student's current understanding by asking carefully designed and sequenced questions that have been paired with carefully selected images. Both questions and images are targeted to the viewers' questions, interests, and skills based on their aesthetic stage. Students are asked to do what they can do. And they are challenged to do what they are ready to do next. Teachers paraphrase, in a nonjudgmental way, each student's contribution, ensuring that each voice is heard and understood. They link ideas, ensuring that the conversations deepen, encouraging learners to continue to look for and construct meanings. In the course of talking about the image, learners effectively teach each other, bringing new observations to light, offering opposing views, and ever widening the discussion. The carefully designed, suitable, and sequenced questions of this learning environment, paired with carefully selected images and paraphrased responses, are critical in the process of fostering aesthetic growth and critical thinking (Housen, 1992a, 1992b, 2002).

Art affords an ideal environment for such teaching and learning. It provides an object of collective attention—something concrete for a classroom to observe and experience, provoking thoughts and feelings while at the same time generating simultaneous and distinctive meanings. The more one looks and

discusses images, together with wellchosen questions and adept facilitation by a teacher, the more there is to see, and the deeper and richer is the learning experience. There are many pathways to move through a stage, and each viewer discovers her own way. Well-chosen works of art support these multiple pathways, and well-crafted educational designs can support a multiplicity of learners as their thinking develops. Together, they provide the foundation for lifelong viewing and learning.

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