

Reprinted from
Contemporary Issues in Art Education,
Yvonne Gaudelius & Peg Speirs, eds.
Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002

Interpreting Art: Building Communal and Individual Understandings

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This chapter provides a general understanding of what it means to interpret art, practical suggestions to engage learners in making interpretations, and some guiding principles to direct their interpretive thinking. When we interpret works of art, we open worlds of meaning and experience for ourselves and for those who hear our interpretations. Unless we interpret works of art, the fascinating and insightful intellectual and emotional worlds that artists make visible for us will be invisible to us. By carefully responding to works of art through inquiring and telling and listening, people build nurturing communities engaged in active learning about art and life.

What It Means to Interpret Art

To interpret is to respond in thoughts and feelings and actions to what we see and experience, and to make sense of our responses by putting them into words. When we look at a work of art, we think and feel, move closer to it and

back from it, squint and frown, laugh or sigh or cry, blurt out something to no one or someone. By more carefully telling or writing what we see and feel and think and do when looking at a work of art, we build an understanding of what we see and experience by articulating in language what might otherwise remain only incipient, muddled, fragmented, and disconnected to our lives. Donald Kuspit, a philosopher and art critic, says that the interpreter's most difficult task is just that: "to try to articulate the effects that the work of art induces in us, these very complicated subjective states" (in Van Proyen, 1991, p. 19).

When writing or telling about what we see and what we experience in the presence of an artwork, we build meaning, we do not merely report it. Marcia Siegel, a dance critic, says, "words are an instrument for thinking" (in Meltzer 1979, p. 55). To demonstrate this to students, I engage them in what some English teachers call "quick-writes." I show them an artwork and ask them to put pencil to paper and write about it for a designated amount of minutes, maybe five or seven or ten, without stopping, editing, or censoring. When they have done this they see that they do have something to say about art and that in the saying they understand the art and their reactions to it better. If they share what they have written, we all gain insights into the work and to one another and have first responses to the work upon which to build more slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully.

To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a work of art to what else we have seen and experienced. Richard Rorty, the philosophical pragmatist, says that "reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens" (Rorty, 1992, p. 105). *Texts* means paintings as well as poems. *Seeing what happens* means examining what connections we can make between a painting, a dance, or a poem and our relevant experiences of books we have read, pictures we have seen, music we have heard, emotions we have felt in situations we have lived or heard about from others. Some of these connections are meaningful and worth pursuing toward greater knowledge and insight about ourselves and the world; other connections are less worthy and we let them fade away.

To interpret is to make something meaningful for ourselves and then, usually, to tell another what we think. In telling our interpretation we hear it in our own words, and we have the opportunity to obtain responses from others about what we see, think, and feel. Others' responses may be confirming or confounding. When they are confirming, we are reassured in our understanding; when they are confounding, we are given opportunity to further explore our interpretive response or to elicit differing interpretive thoughts from the ones who are confounded.

Telling is valuable to others as well as for ourselves. In successfully telling our interpretation to another, we enlarge that person's understanding of the artwork that we are telling about, the world as we understand it, and ourselves. Not to interpret a work of art in its presence is to ignore it, leave it meaningless, and pass it by as if it were dumb and with nothing to offer. For

many aestheticians, to look at a work of art and not interpret it is not to see it at all (e.g., Danto, 1981).

When interpreting art of the historical past, we can seek to know what it meant to the people who saw it in its time, and we can also make it meaningful for ourselves in the present. With art of another culture, we can learn from the outside how it functioned within that culture. We can also see what knowledge and beliefs and attitudes we share with that culture and how we differ from it. Interpreting art of the present and of one's own culture is often simpler because it is generally more immediately accessible just because it is of one's time and place. When teaching interpretation, I often begin with contemporary American art and recent art of the West before using art of times and places distant from those of most of my students.

Some Simple Methods

On the basis of knowledge of art and education, I select works of art that I think are important for students to know about. I also select works that they are developmentally ready for and in which I predict they will be interested. No matter the age or the art, I show the images to groups of students, ask them questions, listen to their responses, and ask further questions (Barrett, 1997). If I am showing works to a whole class in a classroom, I use large poster reproductions or photographic slides or images projected from the Internet. Sometimes I break the whole class into small groups and give them reproductions torn from calendars or on postcards or on websites at computer terminals. I like to have both print reproductions and slides of those reproductions so that I can project large images that the whole class can easily see. If I am dependent on reproductions in classrooms rather than original works in museums, the reproductions must be of high technical quality and shown in good viewing conditions. It is essential that everyone can comfortably see what I am showing.

Carefully formulated questions are essential for productive inquiry (Jacobs, 1997). Of all works of art, I ask two generic questions that guide interpretation, phrased during the ensuing discussion in many different ways: "What do you see?" and "What does it mean?" These two questions are commonly referred to as descriptive and interpretive. Descriptions and interpretations are intertwined and overlapping. They form a hermeneutic circle. We describe what we want to interpret, we interpret what we have described, and we only know what to describe because of the interpretive questions we are trying to answer. To further a speaker's thought, and to remind all of us that claims ought to be grounded in evidence, I sometimes interject a third question, "How do you know?"

I also formulate more specific guiding questions for the work of individual artists. For example, after initial interpretive observations of William Wegman's photographs of dogs, I ask, "Are these about dogs or about people?"

To challenge inquirers to formulate concluding generalizations about many of René Magritte's paintings after we have examined them individually, I ask students to write a paragraph beginning with the phrase "The world of Magritte." I formulate my questions and my assessment of student responses, in part, on the basis of what I know, through direct observation and scholarly study, to be important about the work of Wegman (1990, 1982) and Magritte (Gablik, 1970; Hammacher, 1995; Meuris, 1994), or the work of any artist we are viewing.

During the discussions I constantly reinforce listening skills as well as skills of observation and verbal articulation. If respondents are not listening to one another and are not building on each other's insights, then we are not building a community of inquirers and are losing the benefits of many individual insights that could contribute more knowledgeable and comprehensive understandings.

Some Principals to Guide Interpretation¹

Interpreting Art Is Both a Personal and Communal Endeavor

We can think of interpretations as having two poles, one personal and individual, and the other communal and shared. A satisfactory interpretation is located in both poles but may lean more strongly toward one pole than the other. A personal interpretation is one that I have formulated for myself after careful thought and reflection. It is an interpretation that has meaning to me. I may have accepted it from another, or embrace it with some modifications. Most importantly, the interpretation has meaning to me and for my life. A communal interpretation is an understanding or explanation of a work of art that is meaningful to a group of interpreters with common interests. Through the world of art scholarship, we often receive communal interpretations of works of art that have been initially formulated by individuals, revised by others, reformulated, and then passed on to us in a history of art text by Janson (1999), for example, or in a gallery talk by a curator, or in a comment by a professor in an art class.

Personal Interpretations

Although aestheticians embrace both the individual and communal poles of interpretation, some aestheticians position themselves closer to personal interpretations than to communal understandings. According to the French phenomenological philosopher of interpretation, Paul Ricoeur, for example, *an interpretation is incomplete until the interpreter has meaningfully appropriated the significance of the work for his or her own life* (in Bontekoe, 1988). Rorty (1992) would seem to agree with this position, believing that *there should be*

no difference between interpreting a work and using it to better one's life. Rorty argues that a truly inspired interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one's priorities and purposes in life.

After viewing Magritte's paintings, an elderly woman participating in an interpretive discussion of paintings by Magritte provides an example of an interpreter who was able to make meaning for herself that could change her life. She wrote,

Magritte's works often seem to be of someone looking in on life from the outside, not as a participant. As a widow, I often feel that way. It's sometimes hard to make myself participate. It's often simpler to stay inside, behind walls, behind a curtain—isolated. Life should not be a picture you view. You must put yourself in the picture.²

Children readily make personal interpretations of what they see and experience. When reading a draft of this chapter, my wife gave me a compelling example of a young child who was able to make interpretations very personal. She was his teacher in a Montessori school in Florida.³

I took my class to the beach. One boy was especially fond of the sea. He drew many pictures of the sea. I had art books in the classroom—my college art history texts as well as contemporary books of art. He loved to look at art of the sea. He was an excellent swimmer. I watched him for more than a half-hour do this: he laid down at shore break. His body was limp. He relaxed and let his body do as the sea did. Like a jellyfish caught at shoreline, he moved as ebb and tide. It was one of the most graceful and peaceful movements I have ever seen. I asked him later to tell me about it: he said he watched the water and wanted to feel it, to be it, to draw it, and to write a story about it. Today he is a practicing architect.

Alisha, a second grader, wrote this personal interpretive response to an expressionistic painting of a large monkey sitting in a rain forest, *The Mandrill* by Oscar Kokoschka.

I liked *The Mandrill*. Because when he [the visiting critic] showed the picture to us it felt like I was in the jungle and I could hear the birds chirping. And I could hear it moving. I liked the purple on his fingers. And I could smell the fruit he was eating. I could hear the waterfall coming down. I thought it was neat. It looked like the artist did it fast and a little bit slow. The mandrill looked neat because it looked like I was like right there with him. I just felt like I could see what he was eating. And I could eat with him. I just like it so very, very, very much!

Alisha wrote her paragraph after examining and talking with her classmates about the Kokoschka painting and three other paintings by 20th-century artists. I facilitated that discussion as a guest critic. Following that forty-five minute session, Alisha's teacher⁴ asked her class as a group to orally recall

from memory the four paintings we had discussed, and then to each individually pick a favorite, write about their feelings in seeing it, and illustrate their writing. Alisha's paragraph is personal and it is informed by her classroom community. It is personal in that she tells us how much she likes the painting and how she felt when looking at it. It is communally inflected in that when she saw it in a group and heard others' comments about it, she likely noticed and recalled features of the painting because of her peers' comments.

Although personal interpretations clearly are valuable, and some theorists argue that a personal connection is essential for an interpretation, a personal interpretation can be too personal for purposes of art education. An interpretation that is too personal is one that is so subjective and idiosyncratic to the interpreter that the art object of interpretation cannot be recognized in the interpretation by those who hear the interpretation and see the work. Such an interpretation may reveal a lot about how and what the interpreter thinks and feels but fails to reveal anything about the art object being interpreted.

Communal Interpretations

Personal, individual interpretations can and should be informed by knowledge of the artwork from other persons and sources. Works by renowned artists such as Wegman and Magritte and Kokoschka receive many carefully considered interpretations by the artists themselves, art historians, curators of art who exhibit the works, and art critics who have written about those exhibits. The art of Wegman and Magritte is also the subject of thought by interested viewers outside of the artworld. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1983), for example, was intrigued by Magritte's use of words in his paintings, and although Foucault did not often write about art, he was moved to write a short book about a painting by Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*. When children interpret Wegman's photographs of his Weimaraners, those children who have dogs as pets have knowledge about and insights into the photographs that children without dogs lack. When a scholar reads an interpretation of a Magritte painting written by another scholar, and when a child hears an interpretation of a Wegman photograph told by other children, and when the scholar and the child reflect on those interpretations and include insights from them into their own interpretations, they become part of a community of interpreters. By joining this community, they have opportunities to expand and deepen their individual interpretations and understandings of art and life, as well of those of the members of their community.

The Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2000) offers a communal interpretation of the work of Magritte:

Magritte, René (-François-Ghislain). Belgian artist, one of the most prominent Surrealist painters whose bizarre flights of fancy blended horror, peril, comedy,

and mystery. His works were characterized by particular symbols—the female torso, the bourgeois “little man,” the bowler hat, the castle, the rock, the window, and others.

It is a succinctly articulated, comprehensive, two-sentence interpretation likely culled from volumes of scholarly Magritte interpretations.

Interpreters of young age can also offer communal interpretations. The following is by Luke, a nine-year-old, who wrote it after participating in a group-discussion about paintings by Magritte that I facilitated with him and his classmates.⁵

Magritte’s mind is about things in common. He likes views out of a building or house. He likes perspectives. He likes to have round objects in his paintings. Optical illusions are another thing he puts in his art. He likes to make you think about his paintings. One piece of evidence of that is his titles. He does not give titles that really give any clues. Some of his art is a little fantasy, like in terms of how it looks. But most of his art is realistic.

Luke’s interpretation is communal in the sense that it is synthesized from insights and observations he gained from hearing his classmates talk about the paintings, as well as by his own observations and articulation.

An interpretation that is wholly individual and personal, if such a thing is even possible, runs the risk of being overly idiosyncratic, to the point that if one heard the interpretation one might not be able to see any connection between it and the artwork about which it is an interpretation. An interpretation that is wholly communal runs the risk of irrelevance to the individual interpreter. If the viewer receives an interpretation that has no bearing on his or her life, knowledge, and experience, it is not a meaningful interpretation for that viewer, and in a sense, no matter how accurate it may be, it is not an interpretation for that viewer at all.

Shared communal interpretations and individual personal interpretations are not mutually exclusive ideas. Interpretations that are both individual and communal are understandings of works of art that are personally meaningful and relevant to the viewer’s life, informed by others’ interpretations of that work, and can be meaningfully held by the community of interpreters who are also interpreting the same art.

Any Work of Art Can Support Many Different Interpretations

There can be as many interpretations of a work of art as there are purposes for interpreting that work (Rorty, 1992; Stecker, 1995). Foucault’s interpretation of Magritte’s painting is written especially for those who are interested in philosophy of language and signification. The widow’s interpretation of Magritte’s paintings is for a group of her fellow docents in an art museum.

Luke's interpretation is for his classmates in a grade school. Historical scholars seek to understand how Magritte's work fits within Surrealism and how Surrealism intersects with 20th-century art. A psychological interpretation might seek connections between Magritte's paintings and psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Magritte's contemporary.

Each of these interpretations serves different purposes and different audiences, and each will be assessed by those audiences according to the purpose of the interpretation and the audience's interests. Foucault's interpretation does not exhaust the linguistic meanings of Magritte's painting. The widow's personal interpretation does not exclude other personal interpretations. Luke's interpretation will further more interpretations from other children. Scholars will continue to interpret Magritte's work even though, and because, many scholarly books have already been written about that work. When we hear or read a stunningly insightful interpretation from a third grader or a leading scholar, we should pause and delight in it and absorb it, but we should not abandon the interpretive endeavor. Good artworks invite interpretations and good interpretations invite further interpretations. Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own (Eaton, 1988, p. 120).

Interpretations Are Not So Much Right or Wrong, Rather They Are More or Less Meaningful and Insightful

The goal of interpreting is not to seek one, true, eternal interpretation of a work, but rather to construct interpretations that are insightful, original, interesting, provoke new thoughts, expand meaningful connections, and so forth (Hampshire, 1966). Although there is no single true interpretation of a work of art, some interpretations are better than others because they are more insightful, better grounded in historical fact, better argued, more responsive to what can be seen in the work, more inclusively explanatory of the work's complexities, and more convincing. One can judge the adequacy of an interpretation (Hirsch, 1967; Eaton, 1988, pp. 104–123), by testing its coherence, correspondence, and completeness. Coherence: the interpretation should make sense in and of itself independently of the artwork being interpreted. Correspondence: it is not enough that the interpretation makes sense in itself, it must also account for what can be seen in the artwork, and it ought to fit the historical circumstance of the artwork. Completeness: the interpretation should account for the complexity of the artwork and not ignore or omit significant aspects of the work being interpreted.

Thus, *any* interpretation is not a good interpretation, no matter how well-meaning and hard-working the interpreter. Luke's interpretation of Magritte's work is better than some interpretations offered by his classmates because Luke's interpretation corresponds to what we can observe in the work, it's comprehensive, and it's inclusive. I know this, as a teacher, because when I read

Luke's words I can meaningfully apply them to what I can see in Magritte's paintings. Luke offers evidence for his interpretation. I also know that Luke's interpretation is a good one because it fits within communal interpretations of Magritte's work. Further, Luke seems to have personally engaged with Magritte's paintings. From Luke's written paragraph, we can see that he wants to think about Magritte and the paintings, and Luke seems to own his interpretive insights and conclusions.

Conclusion

When interpretive occasions with groups of learners are successful many good things are happening. Learners are engaged in thinking and talking about art in which they are genuinely interested. Through examining that art and their thoughts and feelings about it, they are learning about the world and their responses to it. Individual students are building individual understandings, and they are also telling them to their classmates, who are listening. Students who actively and respectfully listen to one another are learning that there can be many different responses to the same thing or event. They are learning that one's insight can build on and respond to another's, and that eventually a group of interpreters is able to construct a shared understanding of what they see, and all interpreters leave the session with meanings relevant to their own lives.

Endnotes

1. For more principles of interpretation, see Chapter 4, *Interpreting Art*, in Barrett, T. (2000), *Criticizing art: Understanding the contemporary*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
2. Docent training session, co-leader Susan Michael Barrett, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1999.
3. Susan Michael Barrett, personal correspondence, January 15, 2000, about her experience at the Center for Education, Bradenton, Florida, in 1987.
4. Melissa Thayer-Webber, Devonshire Elementary School, Columbus City Schools, Columbus, Ohio, 1994.
5. Sands Montessori School, Cincinnati Public Schools, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1992.

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