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*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, 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
