Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design
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‘Notes on Aesthetic Understanding and Its Development’

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Like all knowledge, we construct aesthetic understanding over time as we are exposed to works of art. How much or how little aesthetic understanding we develop depends on the nature and duration of this exposure as well as our interest, and, to some extent, our abilities.

What does ‘aesthetic understanding’ mean? Foremost, it must be thought of as a set of operations we develop over time. It begins with aesthetic response: an amalgam of perceptions, thoughts and emotions stimulated in concert by objects and environments that are human-made and usually intended to provoke aesthetic response – things we call art. Aesthetic understanding is the process of making sense of this amalgam. A matter very different for beginners from what it is for those with long histories of viewing, aesthetic understanding starts out as something simpler than it becomes given extended exposure. It is neither simply intuited nor automatic. It occurs as a result of interactions with art; less complicated objects may suffice to initiate the process, but it requires exposure to art for aesthetic understanding to occur, and sustained focus for aesthetic understanding to become rich and varied.

Through most of history aesthetics were defined by consensus built around tradition among people who lived in reasonably homogenous groupings. Family and community made the functional, ceremonial and decorative items we grew to know from many perspectives; design decisions and processes of making folded into growing conceptions of form and function. Aesthetic understandings were very likely unconscious and culturally specific, developing over the unfolding course of life within a culture.

Today several phenomena complicate the development of aesthetic understanding. We no longer live within ethnic or tribal boundaries. Design, media and imagery have a global reach; the things we see, use, own and worship are usually designed by faceless others, using means we do not see or comprehend. Now, for most of us in an increasingly networked world, our visual environment is purchased pre-made, mediated or witnessed at a distance. We cannot construct our understandings from intimate, concrete, sustained experience with entire processes.

Another part of our current conundrum – something many call visual illiteracy – is the enormity of visual material to consume. Element by element, much of the visual culture is reduced to basic signifiers and symbols, quickly learned and subsequently recognized with barely a glance. Other imagery follows formulas—and often stereotypes—designed to inform us instantly about people, places, and events. Still other images are created to

entice us to act, perhaps consume, without letting us know we have been manipulated. By intent, advertisements and promotions discourage questioning the possible implications.

In any case, the plethora of mass-produced and standardized imagery bombarding us daily is very likely to shut us down rather than encourage us to focus and think. And it is somewhat paradoxical that the growth of the visual culture has not produced a concurrent evolution of strategies that teach us to decode complexity. We have expected formal education to provide missing cultural experience, but schooling's half-hearted commitment to addressing visual learning has proved incapable of doing so.

Art is the most complex element within the vast visual environment and it is seldom encountered in day-to-day activity. We keep most of it sheltered in special environments on the periphery of the vast visual world. As a consequence, and probably for the first time in history, people have to come to museums if they want to encounter art, and once there, they need help in making insightful, enjoyable connections to what they find.

But even given the paucity of contact with art, we are still teased by these occasional encounters. Museums and a few publications/media are helpful in instilling and celebrating any appreciation for art that exists. However, the tendency for museums to collect and present broadly adds yet another complication. It is not as if we have only modern culture to deal with. We have all of history to make sense of.

Fortunately there are people whose focus has been to try to understand the cognition that is involved in aesthetic understanding, and those of us dedicated to addressing visual deficits can use them to help us design effective instruction. Aesthetic understanding begins with what Rudolf Arnheim calls 'visual thinking'. Arnheim points out that it is useless to make distinctions between acts of perception – what the eyes do – and thought – what the mind does. The instant the eyes fix on something, an enormously complex operation begins. Processes such as identifying, sorting out and recognizing implications are fast and intelligent. From infancy on, these processes develop given interaction with the physical environment, allowing us in time to understand an array of visual stimuli. However, as stated, art is seldom a part of that environment, and therefore the active construction of ways to comprehend it rarely occurs.

Less well known than Arnheim, but extremely important to visual educators, Abigail Housen has spent over twenty-five years studying a particular aspect of visual thinking that she calls aesthetic thought – what goes on the minds of viewers as they look at art. She uses 'stream-of-consciousness' interviews to collect data, recording people as they look at works of art and talk about what they see. She breaks the transcribed interviews into thought units, which she categorizes based on a coding system developed over the course of her research. She has thus documented the thought patterns employed by people with no exposure to art, those with great expertise, and those in between. From her data she has extracted five stages of aesthetic development.

According to Housen, aesthetic thought is complex from its inception. Observations, associations, interpretations and feelings are merged, especially during the beginning and

end stages. One strength of beginners is the capacity to enter an image directly and to begin making observations. The observations are likely to be few in number, random, concrete and quick, and all are based on personal experience: what is mentioned is what is recognized, and what is recognized is what is known. Some observations are idiosyncratic, making perfect sense to the viewer but not necessarily obvious to others. Many observations refer to emotions found in actions, gestures and expressions. Whatever interpretation is made of them amounts to creating mini-narratives or story-telling.

Strategies beyond story-telling develop over time. Critical analysis, awareness of artists and their intention or original context, symbolic readings and consideration of technique, media and materials are all operations that start in Housen's second stage of viewing, after considerable exposure and time. Interest in and command of art history are the domain of the third phase of development; in Stage III, information (who, when, how; influences, materials, provenance etc.) becomes the frame through which viewers rationalize what they see. Stage IV viewers are well informed in the viewing strategies developed during Stage II and in the classifying thinking that dominates Stage III, and overlay that knowledge and those abilities with an interest in interpreting works in terms of personal association, metaphor and symbol. Stage V viewers – few in number, and usually well advanced in a career in art – use all earlier frameworks with ease and comfort, and additionally think of art as part of a philosophical discourse with life that infuses readily available concrete, personal, narrative, and historical insights with abstract and conceptual linkages to all manner of ideas, topics and themes.

Although Housen unearthed five stages of aesthetic development, her extensive research has shown that most young people are in Stage I and most randomly selected museum visitors are Stage II. Most people working in museums are Stage III, with some, usually more mature people, in the later stages – which is itself evidence of how much time and exposure is required for development to occur.

As a way of confirming the accuracy of Housen's findings, we only need consider what so many of us find among our otherwise informed, educated and motivated audiences: that few people are fluent regarding art terminology, concepts and historical understandings. Many lack flexibility: they are comfortable only with familiar objects, styles and forms but will struggle with new material, sometimes by-passing it and at other times overtly negative. They have no readily available strategies for making meaning of the wide variety of art displayed in museums. They look at relatively little, doing so very quickly, and spend small amounts of time in contemplation.

Museum educators are charged with helping these less-than-ideally prepared visitors to engage meaningfully with the art exhibited. Decisions about how to help often seem determined by the higher stage interests of staff not those of visitors: information - the concern of Housen's Stage III - often dominates as content. We thus risk going over the heads of visitors. Many theorists can help us minimize this risk, however, providing us with data and theory concerning both needs and abilities of beginning viewers.

From Arnheim we learn (along with much else, of course) that vision and thought are inseparable, and that we need to encounter art objects themselves as part of our experience for it to become meaningful. From a whole range of psychologists (developmentalists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky and constructivists such as Jerome Bruner) we find that no learning occurs without activity – in art's case, looking and thinking about what one sees – and relatively little happens without help whether formal, e.g. instruction, or informal, e.g. observing others engaging with art. In other words, as with other skills needed to negotiate contemporary life (language, reading and so on), the literacy required to 'read' images and the development of aesthetic thought must be learned through active construction of those capacities by the learner. Moreover, little happens without the aid of those more capable: parents and teachers who create opportunities for and perhaps structure interactions with art. The most potent instruction for beginners will involve extended examination and reflection on what one finds.

From Housen we can derive a number of finite steps to initiate and sustain an instructional process. From her research we can surmise that Stage I and II beginners are likely to be most attracted to, engaged by and capable of understanding art that is generally representational, depicting familiar, concrete places and things, and with people engaged in recognizable activities expressing a range of emotions. In other words, our teaching might begin with selecting images that are accessible and intriguing yet still puzzling. We can arrange time for focused exposure to these works, putting them in a sequence that builds towards great complexity. In order to counter the paucity of observations typical of beginners, we can intervene and ask them to look longer and find more. We can ask for evidence to back up conclusions drawn in order to build toward the logic that develops in Stage II. Working with groups of viewers, we can facilitate on-going discussions that allow for rich readings, following up open-ended questions with more directive questions that encourage probing into character, setting and time as well as into the actions of the artists. We can respect the sharing of observations and opinions and give a chance for debating multiple views. We can thus encourage speculative thinking and revising opinions, both keys to aesthetic understanding.

According to Housen, the issues germane to decorative arts education – including observation of detail; appreciation of craft, style and materials; historical frame of reference; authenticity; and connoisseurship – are operative in later stages of aesthetic development. Some of these concerns first manifest during the course of Stage II, but most are in full bloom in Stage III and later. Instructional efforts will therefore be most fruitful for people in late Stage II and above, which, given Housen's finding regarding museum visitors' stages, is unfortunately few.[i]

Another problem facing those of us who want to help visitors to decorative arts collections grow is the nature of museum visiting. Most visitors come infrequently, for relatively short periods of time and often with others who have different interests and spans of concentration. Museum galleries are full of the best kinds of distractions too, and most of the common devices (labels, brochures, audio or a-v tools) lend themselves best to passive instruction, not activity on the part of the beginner. Any ambition to make a huge difference in the lives of visitors, given such odds, is probably misplaced.

Still, we can certainly do things that captivate their attention and encourage longer examination. We can tell them things – facts, stories, insights regarding form and function. We can show them processes, and let them interact physically with things – attempting techniques, touching materials, using functional and wearable reproductions and so on. We can help them make distinctions and to puzzle through problems. But it is unlikely that such will stick and become useful in future encounters without preparatory and follow-up education outside the museum.

There are excellent examples of what can be done with installations such as period rooms and other context-providing exhibits, instructional devices from labels to hands-on activities to uses of audio-visual and computer technologies, and in-gallery teachers. The reinstallation of the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is decidedly one of them. The overwhelmingly positive response to the galleries from both public and professional audiences is testimony to what can be accomplished.

That said, the large goal of increasing aesthetic understanding cannot be addressed by gallery education alone. It is time we developed partnerships among museums and between museums and schools to create long-term interactions for people, beginning in youth. All people, not just museum visitors, deserve to have art in their lives, and exposure to a wide range of objects with developmentally appropriate instruction is key to reintegrating art into the lives of all. Not to mention creating audiences that come ready for the delights we can share with them.

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[i] For a more extended discussion of Housen and decorative arts education, go to www.vue.org, click on 'downloads', and see an article entitled 'Housen's Theory and Decorative Arts Education', originally written for Old Collections New Audiences: Decorative Arts and Visitor Experience for the 21st Century, ed. Donna R. Braden (Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, 2000). www.vue.org downloads also contain articles by Abigail Housen that detail her theory, method and extensive research.

Philip Yenawine

Philip Yenawine is founding director of Visual Understanding in Education (VUE), a nonprofit entity that conducts research in developmentally-based education specifically intending to foster cognitive growth through interaction with art. VUE develops programs for schools and museums, the primary example of which is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Abigail Housen is the other founding director of VUE.

Prior to founding VUE, Yenawine was director of education at The Museum of Modern Art for almost a decade, which ended in 1993 when he accepted a one year position as visiting professor at Massachusetts College of Art. For two years he was a visiting curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art, also in Boston. For the spring semester of 1996, he was the George A. Miller Visiting Scholar at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana.

In the late 1960s, Yenawine was on the staff of the New York State Council on the Arts, and he has been on the education staff of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art as

well as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. He was director of museum programs at the South Street Seaport in New York, and founding director of the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado. Along with many articles and essays, Yenawine is the author of six books about modern art for children and two books for adults also addressing the questions and interests of beginning viewers, How to Look at Modern Art and Key Art Terms for Beginners. He lectures all over the country, often regarding issues in contemporary art as well as on teaching about art.

He has been involved with many efforts that support the rights and needs of artists, including Art Matters (a foundation that provides fellowships to visual artists) and Visual AIDS (the organization that sponsors Day Without Art and the Red Ribbon project).