

# More about Art Inquiry



## General Questions about an Artwork



**What Can I See in the Artwork?**

**What Choices Will I Make in My Artwork?**

### Introduction

How well you understand or appreciate an artwork can depend on how well you've looked at it. Some parts of artworks jump out at you at first glance. You discover other parts only by looking very carefully. Sharing your responses with a friend, family member, or classmate can make you more aware of differences in perceptions. Your first impressions of the meaning or value of an artwork can cause you to focus more on some features than others.

Take the time to really look carefully and thoroughly at one artwork. Some important things to look for are subject matter details, if there are any; elements of design and how they are organized; and evidence of the tools and materials the artist used to make the artwork. If you are looking at a reproduction, look for a listing of its dimensions and materials. Especially for three-dimensional artworks, see if you can find photographs shot at different angles. Close-up shots are helpful with any artwork.

The artworks you make look as they do because of choices you make about whether and what subject matter to include; about what elements of design to feature and how to organize those elements; and what tools, materials, and processes you use to achieve the look you want. After you have completed your work, if you want to share it with others, you may consider how you might reproduce it, for example, through photography or scanning.

### Subject Matter

**LOOK: What people, places, or things, if any, are shown in this artwork?**

**CHOOSE: Will my artwork have subject matter?**

Some artworks have subject matter and others do not. Content or meaning can be expressed in different ways, not only through subject matter, but also through the selection and use of materials or through visual features, such as color or lines. "Subject matter" is not synonymous with "content" or "meaning." Subject matter can certainly be important in understanding meaning, but it is not the same thing. You can have identified all the subject matter in an artwork and still not have developed an interpretation of the artwork.

The term "subject matter" is used here quite narrowly. Subject matter imitates the appearance of something. It refers to any person, place, or thing (real or imaginary) that is depicted (shown or represented) in an artwork. Virtually anyone familiar with people, places, or things depicted in an artwork can recognize that subject matter immediately when details are pointed out.

### Elements of Design

**LOOK: What one or two elements of design (line, shape, light & dark, color, texture, mass, space, or other) are most important to this artwork? Why?**

**CHOOSE: What one or two elements of design is most important for the success of my artwork?**

There is no single, traditional, visual vocabulary used in art across the world. However, in recent centuries in the West (cultures with their roots in Europe) many artists and experienced viewers of art have used similar terms to describe and analyze the visual features of artworks. Many art teachers teach these terms in beginning art courses. They are commonly called the “Elements of Design” and usually include two-dimensional elements (line, shape, value [light and dark], color) and three-dimensional elements [form or mass, space, and texture), and sometimes also the four-dimensional element of time. Recently, text and sounds are sometimes included as art elements. Text can be an element in both two and three-dimensional art. Sound is an element that involves the fourth dimension of time.

All artifacts have at least three dimensions. Small or large, they all have height, width, and depth. Some objects, such as paper, foil, and painted canvases are so thin that we call them two-dimensional, even though they all have some depth. Otherwise, they could not exist in space. Artifacts that change as we experience them, like movies, television, and computer animation, can be called four-dimensional. In addition to the dimensions of height, width, and depth, these things have the fourth dimension of time.

## Design Principles

**LOOK: How did the artist use design principles to organize elements within this work?**

**CHOOSE: What design principles can I use to organize the elements into an interesting and unified composition?**

“Design Principles” is a term commonly used to identify ways artists organize elements of design to create interesting and unified compositions. Though art specialists sometimes use different terms and though principles sometimes overlap, the following are often identified among the principles of design: balance, harmony, emphasis, focal point, movement, direction, pattern, variation, repetition, rhythm, transition, contrast, and proportion.

Olivia Gude (2004) found traditional elements and principles of design inadequate for contemporary art. She identifies the following eight “important postmodern artmaking practices:” (O. Gude. (2004). Postmodern principles: A search for 21<sup>st</sup> century art education. *Art Education*, 57 (1). 6-14.)

APPROPRIATION – recycling of images

JUXTAPOSITION – “intentional clashes and random happenings”

RECONTEXTUALIZATION – “positioning a familiar image in relationship to pictures, symbols, or texts with which it is not usually associated”

LAYERING – literally piling images on top of each other

INTERACTION OF TEXT & IMAGE – exploring “disjuncture between [words & images] as a source of meaning and pleasure”

HYBRIDITY – multi-media works of art and cross-cultural blending

GAZING – considering “who is being looked at and who is doing the looking ... associated with issues of knowledge and pleasure [and as] a form of power and of controlling perceptions of what is ‘real’ and ‘natural.’”

REPRESENTIN’ – locating one’s artistic voice within one’s own personal history and culture of origin.”

## Technical Features

**LOOK: What can I see in the artwork that shows the tools, materials, or process the artist used to make it?**

**CHOOSE: What tools, materials, and processes am I considering?**

Many people use the term “technical” to refer to anything an expert would know about. However the term is used here in a narrow way, limited to the physical art making process. Just a few of the many technical processes artists use are watercolor, woodcarving, and weaving.

Careful observation and analysis of objects can reveal how they were formed by human hands or tools. The technical features of an artwork are the results of how it was made. You can usually find a list of materials or the process used to make an artwork listed on the label of an artwork in an exhibition or in the caption of a print or online image. If you have had experience working with the same or similar tools or materials, sometimes you can see evidence of the making process when you look very carefully at an original artwork, or even at a very good reproduction. For example, you may be able to see wide or narrow brush strokes, chisel grooves, pen or chalk lines produced with heavy or light pressure, joints where parts are put together, surfaces left bare or altered, diluted paint, sharply cut lines in a linocut, layers of ink on a silkscreen print, or tools or finger marks in a ceramic piece.

## Function

**LEARN: What function or purpose does this artwork serve? For whom?**

**SEEK: Will my work have a function? If so, what function?**

Throughout time, people have made objects to serve functions, that is, to do something. For example, some objects store things for you; others give you a place to sit; and others help you get from place to place. Many objects look as they do because of the function they serve, like a jar, chair, or coat. Some objects are designed to serve multiple functions, like a Swiss Army knife or a cell phone. Some objects made for one purpose are used for another, like an old iron used as a doorstop or a mug used as a pencil holder.

Many functional artifacts such as garments, altarpieces, vases, tapestries, and other similar objects can now be seen in museums where they have become objects of aesthetic appreciation and study. Taken out of the context in which they were originally created, their purpose may change. For example, many objects that indigenous people made for everyday or ceremonial use were acquired by collectors and exhibited in historical museums or in natural history museums. Some of these objects can now be seen in the collections of art museums.

Artists today make artworks that serve a great many diverse traditional and new functions, such as capturing the beauty of a place in nature, memorializing an important event, demonizing or glorifying a prominent person, experimenting with visual possibilities, adding aesthetic interest to an otherwise ordinary object (chair, container, building, etc.), challenging traditional perceptions, promoting a belief, or celebrating local heritage, and much more.

## Reproduction Vs Original

**LOOK: What might I be missing if I'm not looking at the actual artwork but at this work as a reproduction? (For example, surface texture, luminosity, or views from different angles or with different lighting)**

**CHOOSE: What qualities in my artwork work might be difficult to capture in a reproduction (for example, if it were reproduced online or in a photograph or a scan)?**

Some people have original artworks in their homes, schools, or workplaces. Some people see the real thing installed in public places. A great many original artworks are stored and exhibited in museums. Most of the art we see is not the original but some kind of photographic, electronic, or print reproduction. Reproductions, posters, and three-dimensional replicas are commercially made in large numbers. Some reproductions can look pretty different from the originals. Size is seldom the same. Colors are often distorted. Texture and luminosity are often completely lost in reproductions. Angle of view and lighting can affect the quality of reproductions, especially of three-dimensional artworks. Even though they are not originals, reproductions in the form of posters, postcards, books, and Internet images allow us to see a tremendous range of artworks that we could never hope to see in person.

Some artists using processes like printmaking, casting, photography, and computer graphics produce **multiple original artworks**. When numerous originals are made, the set of originals is called an edition.

## Care

**LOOK: Does the artwork look different today than when it was first made, due to deterioration of some sort? How is it being cared for?**

**CHOOSE: What can you do as you create your artwork or as you store or exhibit it to ensure that it stays in good condition?**



## General Questions about an Artist's Background



**What Can I Learn about the Life and Times  
of an Artist?**

**What Ideas Can I Get from  
My Own Life and Times?**

### Introduction

Sometimes you need to know information about where and when an artist made an artwork to make sense of it. Captions in print and online references as well as wall labels in exhibitions usually tell you basic information, such as the artist's name, culture, and the date the artwork was made. Contextual information can be very useful, especially when an artwork was made at a different time or in a culture different from your own.

What, if anything, do you already know about the place and time when the artist worked? Having carefully examined one or more of the artist's works and based on what you already know, what questions do you have about the artist's background? Seeking answers to these questions may help you better understand or appreciate the artwork. Important contextual information might focus on the artist's life; the physical environment where s/he lived and worked; the artist's culture; the art training, norms, or movements of the artist's era; or how the artwork was used.

You can get ideas for your art from many sources, including from your own life; from the physical environment around you; from your culture; from artists, art teachers, art critics, and other art specialists; or from the function you want your work to serve.

### Artist's Life

**LEARN: What were the personal background and life experiences of the artist?**

**SEEK: What art ideas can you get from your own personal or family experiences?**

People who make art and other artifacts live personal lives like the rest of us. As they grow from children to adults, the people they know, places they go, and things they do help form their personalities and values which, in turn, are reflected in the artworks they make. Artists, like everyone else, have families, grow up in particular places, usually go to school, often travel, and usually have spouses and children. Sometimes specific events in artists' lives have a profound effect on their art making. Knowing something about the personal lives of artists often helps you understand why they make the kind of artwork they do.

### Physical Environment

**LEARN: What are the natural, built, and material-culture environments like where the artist lives/lived and worked?**

**SEEK: Can I get ideas from my physical environment?**

The physical world all around us consists of structures made by people or by nature. Most of us live, learn, work, and play in environments that are part natural and part constructed. We are surrounded by objects of materials culture, such as clothing, automobiles, home furnishings, games, sports equipment, and advertisements. Our experiences in these environments from childhood through old age can influence our values, interests, and ambitions. The physical environments where they have lived or traveled have influenced many artists. Some artists find subject matter for their art in the plants, animals, landforms, buildings, bridges, machines, consumer products, and other physical artifacts from the world around them. For thousands of years and still today, some artists have used things from their environment as materials or for tools in their art making, such as leather, charcoal, grass, wood, or clay. Humans' relationship to the environment (dominance, stewardship, destruction, etc.) provide inspiration for some artists.

## Culture

**LEARN: What did/do people think, believe, and do in the artist's culture?**

**SEEK: Can I get ideas from my culture?**

As we grow up and live with others, we learn the ways of our group. We learn shared activities, beliefs, and languages that unite our culture. Some cultures grow and change. Some are threatened with extinction. Others combine with others or evolve into new cultures. Cultures can be very large, like Western European, or much smaller, like Apache.

Artists, like the rest of us, are members of larger and smaller cultures, which influence what they care about and what they do. Among the many aspects of culture are socio-economic class, religious perspective, scientific understandings, technological and industrial developments, historical and political events, recreational interests, and prevailing values. Most of us see ourselves as members of several larger and smaller groups, for example, a Midwestern, theater-going gardener; a Southern backpacking reptile lover; or a West Coast hip-hop singing surfer. Every artist is influenced to some greater or lesser extent by the ideas, beliefs, and activities of the culture around her or him.

Some artworks originally made to be seen by certain privileged individuals within a culture (aristocracy, religious leaders, royalty, or initiated members of a particular class) have been removed from their original contexts (such as stately homes, churches or temples, palaces, or private clan locations) and now are seen by a much wider, even cross-cultural audience, for example in public museums.

## Artworld

**LEARN: What art training, traditions, movements, and expectations surrounded the artist?**

**SEEK: Can I get ideas from my art classes or from fellow art students?**

We all have special interests that we share with others. Groups develop around all sorts of interests, for example, basketball, computer games, or movies. People who share interests gain knowledge and skills that less interested people have not developed. Sometimes members of an interest group construct their own culture with its own language. Among thousands of interest groups are some with a strong visual focus. Just a few contemporary visual cultures are the worlds of fashion, custom cars, cartooning, and tattooing, as well as the traditional artworlds of painting, sculpture, and architecture. An artworld is a specific culture within a larger, general cultural context.

When people pursue particular visual interests, they usually seek support from visual cultures. They attend gatherings, classes, conferences, ceremonies, or workshops to participate in activities where they can share ideas and develop skills. They become familiar with the traditional values and expectations of that visual world and sometimes participate in new movements that challenge those traditions. Members of traditional mainstream U.S. artworlds include, among others, artists, art critics, art historians, collectors, art teachers, gallery owners, and museum goers. An artworld is a culture maintained by people a significant portion of whose identity is drawn in some way from art. A person who is a member of an artworld is loosely or formally associated with other members of that artworld. Members of an artworld are familiar with some of the same art values and art ideas, and engage in, or are familiar with, some of the same art activities. Around the world and through the ages there have been many diverse artworlds, such as the Italian Renaissance artworld; the sixteenth century Incan artworld; the ceremonial artworld of the Kuba people of West Africa; and the contemporary gallery artworld in Los Angeles. The shared information, values, and activities that define these artworlds vary tremendously. Values and criteria upheld in one artworld may not be prized in another. Investigating an unfamiliar artworld opens avenues for gaining insights into unfamiliar, otherwise seemingly incomprehensible, or not-easily-appreciated artworks made within that unfamiliar artworld.



## General Questions that Compare Artworks



**How Does This Artwork Compare  
with Other Artworks?**

**What Ideas Can I Get by Looking  
at Other Art?**

### Introduction

Finding connections with other artworks can bring new perspectives to any artwork. For example, artworks can share style, show influences of earlier artworks, or be about similar big ideas. Every artwork is similar in some way to other artworks. Looking at several artworks by the same artist can help you begin to see the world through the lens of that artist. A single unusual work can begin to look normal within the context of others similar to it. It's as if the artist teaches you to see, think, or feel in a new way.

Comparing one artist's work to others working in the same or a similar style, especially if you discover that they were familiar with each others' work, can help you place the work in its artworld context. Seeing artwork by an artist's teacher or by an artist's students or followers can help you find that artist's place in the complex web which is the history of art. Some human themes are so universal that you can find the same or a similar idea expressed by artists who may never have known each others' work.

You can get ideas for your own art by looking at artworks by other artists. For example, you might want to work in a style that others have used (or refine/develop a style of your own); follow (or react against) a direction set by another artist; or express your own feelings or ideas about a theme that other artists before you have addressed.

### Style

**COMPARE: How is this artwork similar in style to other artworks made in the same context (by the same artist, within his/her movement, or within his/her culture)?**

**EXPLORE: Do I want my art to be similar in style to other artworks I, or other artists have made?**

"Style" is a set of distinctive qualities that are shared by more than one artwork, artifact, or performance. You may recognize certain gestures and facial expressions that characterize the style of a particular performer's acting. You may recognize familiar instrumentation or choral structure common to a rock group's style or an approach to fabric and line that characterizes garments of a particular designer's style. Stylistic similarities you recognize are often not identical in every example of that style, yet there is enough "family resemblance" to allow you to recognize the style. If you have seen numerous works by a particular artist (for example Van Gogh), you can often recognize a work by that artist the first time you see it by its style alone.

In visual art, common characteristics of a style might include a typical medium, characteristic techniques (particular ways in which materials and tools are used), common subject matter, typical selection of dominant visual features, and similar formal organization. There are personal styles (Mary Cassatt's style, Hokusai's style, or the style of the Master of Flémalle), period or movement style (Impressionist style, the Shang Dynasty style in China, Edo style in Japan, or the Gupta style in India), as well as general cultural styles (Incan style, Hawaiian style, Assyrian style, or Lakota style).

## **Influence**

**COMPARE: What earlier artists or artworks influenced this artist?**

**EXPLORE: How has your work been influenced by other artists or their work?**

When you take on a new challenge, you usually learn from others who have attempted something similar. New business plans grow out of traditional plans. New scientific theories extend, redirect, or contradict earlier theories. Aspiring baseball pitchers learn what they can from seasoned veterans, even as they work to hone their own moves and strategies. Most artists are influenced by artists who worked before them. Some self-taught artists, called "outsider artists," work in isolation, largely unaware of the work of other artists. However, in today's visual world even these artists are exposed to images and artifacts made by advertisers, automotive designers, commercial architects, and others.

## **Theme**

**COMPARE: What other artworks can be associated with the theme underlying this artwork?**

**EXPLORE: What other artist has expressed a big idea similar to the theme in which I'm interested?**

A theme is a general idea expressed in an artwork. Diverse artworks can be connected through their relationship to a theme. Themes can be narrow or broad, for example, "desert landscapes" is a narrower theme than "natural environment." People in various cultures throughout history have been interested in some of the same themes, or general ideas. Some of these broad, cross-cultural themes include our relationship with nature, cultural pride, conquest, overcoming obstacles, the strength of family, fantasy, social order, harmony, chaos, revisiting history, and heroic adventure. Many poets, composers, choreographers, playwrights, filmmakers, scientists, politicians, and everyday people have struggled passionately to express their insights about these and other big ideas. Many of the artworks that continue to reward the attention of viewers through time and across cultures shed light on enduring human themes.



## General Questions about Meanings and Goals



**What Does This Artwork Mean?**

**What Do I Want to Achieve with My Artwork?**

### Introduction

Interpretation is the process involved in finding and articulating meaning in an artwork and building a case to support that conclusion. When you interpret an artwork, you try to figure out what it means or what it is about. An artwork can have meaning/significance/content without having subject matter. For example it might be about an emotion, a spatial relationship, the qualities of a medium, tension, order, etc.

Strong artworks can sustain more than one good interpretation. Some well-known artworks have been interpreted various ways through the years by different art historians and critics, for example Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, or Frida Kahlo's self portraits. An interpretation can be thought of as an invitation to viewers to consider ideas and insights offered by a person who has spent time with an artwork and given it a lot of thought.

Not all interpretations are equal. Your interpretation is better if you can support it with evidence both in the artwork and from the context in which it was made. You can formulate your own interpretation based on what you see, any contextual information you have, and what you've learned by comparing this artwork with others. Often you can construct a richer or fuller interpretation of an artwork by considering conclusions reached by others, such as the artist, art experts, or people living at the time the work was made.

Some people confuse the artist's intention with an artwork's meaning. This confusion is sometimes called the *intentional fallacy*. Learning what an artist wanted to do can be helpful, but intentions may not have been successfully accomplished or the artwork may have more to say than the artist realized at the time. As they work, many artists shift roles between artist as creator to artist as critic or interpreter, in order to more effectively achieve their intentions.

Some people confuse their own personal responses with an artwork's meaning. This confusion is sometimes called the *affective fallacy*. Certainly, everyone has a right to a personal response to an artwork, and brings his/her own distinctive experience to it. Considering your own reactions to an artwork is one good place to start interpreting an artwork. However, your interpretation is better if you can support it with credible facts about the artwork itself and with contextual facts.

You can have a clear idea about what you want to do before beginning to make your artwork. Or your ideas may evolve as you work. What do you want your art to be about? What do you want it to express or communicate?

### Artist's Intention

**INTERPRET: Why did the artist want this artwork to look as it does?**

**PLAN: What is my goal as an artist?**

Artists decide how they want their artworks to look. Artists can have many different intentions as they make choices that lead to their final artworks. Their intentions may be personal; they may be traditional for their culture and times; they may be revolutionary or confrontational. Artists can have more than one intention for their work. Some artists begin with clearly developed intentions. Other artists' intentions change as their work progresses.



Outside factors like the theme of a group show or the requirements of a patron can also influence an artist's intentions. In some cultures, artists balance their own intentions with the intentions of others, such as patrons, employers, government agencies, dealers, gallery directors, or ceremonial leaders. Persons other than the artists might dictate features of the artwork, such as subject matter, technical process, or size. Presumably in such cases one of the artist's intentions is to please (or at least satisfy or placate) others.

## Art Specialists' Understandings

**INTERPRET: How do/did art specialists understand this work?**

**PLAN: How would I like my artwork to be understood in the artworld? Which artworld?**

Why pay attention to the conclusions of specialists? In artworlds, as in other domains of life, there are people who devote a great deal of time and effort to gaining knowledge and developing specialized skills. People with shared interests but less experience and knowledge often seek assistance and guidance from specialists. Specialists in mainstream U.S. artworlds include, among others, artists, art teachers, museum curators, art critics, and art historians. In other visual worlds, specialists sometimes include such experts as ceremonial leaders, master crafts people, and tribal elders. In different cultures and eras, various classes of society have played a variety of roles in their culture's artworld. Did you know that in traditional imperial China an understanding of art was an expectation for the nobility and other members of the court? Some emperors were artists themselves. Among the Yoruba people of West Africa there are individuals who serve as specialists in judging beauty. Sometimes through the years, art specialists' understandings of artworks change. Artworks prized or derided by art specialists in one era may be appreciated quite differently in another era.

## Cultural Understandings

**INTERPRET: How was this artwork understood within the culture of its time or by members of other cultures or subcultures (not art specialists)?**

**PLAN: Do I want my work to reflect or impact my culture or society?**

Everyone shares many ideas and values with members of the groups or cultures with which they identify. Unless you make an effort to familiarize yourself with the ideas and values of other groups and cultures, you are likely to automatically respond to new experiences with your own culture's familiar ideas and values. Your own cultural experiences may unconsciously dominate your response.

A cultural viewpoint draws upon a set of ideas, beliefs, and standards shared broadly within a culture. These are learned, not by special effort and instruction, but simply through growing up as a member of a culture. Growing up in a culture makes nearly everyone familiar with certain artworks or special artifacts (even when a special term for "art" does not exist in all cultures.). For example, nearly all traditional Hopis learn the meanings of carved katsinas and the masks and costumes worn by katsina dancers at ceremonies. In some cultures understanding of certain images, such as images of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican American communities, is passed on to anyone growing up traditionally within the culture. Many people, simply by growing up in the United States, learn the names of "famous artists" such as Van Gogh and Frida Kahlo, even if they are unfamiliar with the work of these artists. Sometimes artworks not considered particularly important in the artworld (such as Norman Rockwell, Thomas Kincaid, Ted DeGracia, or M.C. Escher) are better known by the general public than artworks judged to be significant by art specialists.

The popular media commonly pass on and reinforce stereotypes about art. Two such stereotypes are: that art is virtually entirely a matter of talent and freedom of expression; and that artists are rebellious, emotional, and eccentric. Most people who have received little or no formal instruction in art hold unexamined assumptions passed on within their families, communities, or the media. Many people in the United States have learned little, if anything, about important historical or contemporary American art. If they have acquired some ideas, beliefs, and standards to help them understand artworks, they are likely to have had teachers, trained in art, who introduced them to these understandings, or they may have read books, visited museums, attended lectures, and in other ways gone out of their way to learn about the ideas, beliefs, and standards of the artworld.

## Your Own Viewpoint

**INTERPRET: How might my own personal experiences affect how I understand this artwork?**

**PLAN: What are my personal goals?**

Everyone has a right to draw his/her own conclusions. All sorts of conscious and unconscious experiences can affect a person's preferences (likes and dislikes) and other immediate responses to particular artifacts and artworks.

Virtually everyone has a viewpoint on art in general and on any artworks with which they come into contact. Some people choose not to dedicate serious attention to considering an artwork in order to attempt to understand it. Their responses can be non-reflective statements of preference or free association (this reminds me of...). Some individuals bring unique perspectives to an artwork. For example, people driving past a mural on an LA freeway; Chicagoans who regularly walk past the to-them-familiar lion sculptures in front of the Art Institute; construction workers who had a part in building a skyscraper in New York; hunters and environmentalists viewing artworks inspired by nature; members of one religion viewing sacred artworks from another, etc. People's interest in politics, religion, censorship, or legal matters may pique their interest in controversies involving current art exhibitions or new public art installations.

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