

Summary:

Both literacy (related to the written word) and visual literacy (relating to works of our visual culture) are closely related while still being considered to be very different. In both instances we are deriving meaning from generally agreed upon symbols as well as indicators that are open to interpretation. Let's take a simple example: Red. The letters represent individual sounds and, in this order, denote a color. This color we may associate with specific objects, for example a stop sign or certain apples. When used in conjunction with other words it takes on different meanings. A "red-letter day" is a noteworthy day, not one where all letters are made using the color red. Similarly, through visual literacy we can arrive at some similar starting points. Red is a color that we associate with certain objects, but when it takes a specific form or in context with other forms or colors it can take on meanings that are both agreed upon by a culture or that are open to interpretation. A red octagon may make you want to stop, even if you only see that shape in red. A blue octagon would likely not make you think of stopping. Think of a time you've walked into a store and seen lots of different shades of red ranging from pink to deep dark red. What time of year is it? Probably around Valentines Day? If you see a flashing red light, would you interpret that to mean everything is great, or that there is something wrong? What if the light wasn't flashing? Visual literacy goes well beyond these basic examples, but the kinds of questions that we can consider to arrive at these basic conclusions can help us explore our visual culture and gain a deeper understanding of what we see around us. Fortunately, some of the ways that we can approach visual literacy work equally well as starting points for young children or adults.

Content:

What do I see?

This simple question is a great place to start with any work of art and can be answered in many different ways. Your answer can be as simple as listing what you can identify. In the case of Andrew Burns' *Plaza Shindig*, you might see a child, a drum set, and trees. In *Christmas Eve, Taos Pueblo* by Gene Kloss someone might note people, ladders, and buildings. Listing out these basic elements is something that we all do to some degree, probably without thinking about it. Younger viewers can be encouraged to do this more deliberately, older children or adults will do this more as a matter of course.

Try to go a little deeper with each of these images. When taking those basic elements together in the context of the artwork, now what do you see? In *Plaza Shindig* a younger viewer might see music, a party, a concert, fun, or maybe even an event that they have attended in a similar looking location. For *Christmas Eve, Taos Pueblo* someone else might see night time, a ceremony, or people seeking warmth during a cold night. As you continue to explore an image, you may think of a story, be reminded of past experiences, or relate what you see to an idea or something you've read.

What do I think about that?

Now let's take all of those things you have seen in the art, and ask another question: What do I think about that? There is no right or wrong answer here, just your answer. Taking the example of *Plaza Shindig* again, two viewers may both see a concert on a plaza. They both see musical instruments, people dancing, and a crowd gathered. The first person may think this is a depiction of a fun community musical event in a public place. They may even go as far as to think this is the kind of event they would

like to attend. The second person, looking at the same image may think something very different. The second person may see a community concert that makes them feel uncomfortable or anxious.

What leads me to that conclusion?

This last question can have both simple and complex answers. Considering those answers can help you expand your visual literacy skills. Let's go back to our examples of a red octagon and a blue octagon. The red octagon made us think about stopping, but the blue one didn't. Why? What led us to that conclusion? In this case, the answer is simple. Stop signs. In the United States and many other countries, a red octagon is used as a kind of universal symbol for stop. Stop signs aren't blue, so the blue octagon didn't hold the same kind of agreed upon meaning. Not everything we see in a work of art has a universally agreed upon meaning. Often the way we interpret a work of art has a personal element to it. Let's take our two viewers who saw very different things in *Plaza Shindig*. The first viewer who saw a fun community concert may have noted the relaxed posture crowd, the dancers dancing in various locations, and the mellow body language of the musician in the large yellow hat. To this viewer all of these things add up to a concert where people are gathered to enjoy themselves. The second viewer also saw a concert, but one that made them feel anxious. For that person, the gathered crowd may make the scene feel crowded or claustrophobic. The speakers behind the band could indicate that the music would be too loud close to the musicians. Understanding if your conclusions are drawn from personal interpretations or from more culturally adopted symbolism can help you to read a work of art and to understand your own reactions to it.

Try these questions out with some other works of art in The Humanities Project or the next time you visit your local art museum. What you see may be easier or more challenging to work with, but it will always be worth your time. It is also good to note that developing your visual literacy skills won't only help you when looking at works of art. The world is full of visual information that you can understand better through visual literacy. Why does an image in your local newspaper conjure up certain ideas? Does an advertisement online make you think about purchasing a new product? Visual information is communicated to us all the time, even when we aren't focusing on it. Spending time focusing on how we understand that visual information in a museum or art gallery is we think is both enjoyable and enriching for everyone!