# VTS Visual Thinking Strategies™

**Jump Starting Visual Literacy:
Thoughts on Image Selection**

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Choosing objects to introduce the wonders of art to beginning viewers should be a thoughtful process. When we as parents and teachers choose books to engage early readers, we carefully consider both what the new readers are ready for developmentally and what captures and is likely to sustain their interest. No one questions this logic, in part because we recognize that reading is a skill acquired through one's own effort and practice. We learn to read through the activity of reading; others assist, with one key piece being the supplying of the right challenge at the right time.

Why not apply the same principles to choosing art to engage and motivate beginning viewers? If we want novices to develop solid rapport with art based on direct, personal connections, why shouldn't we think about what art is appropriate to get them started? If we also want them to learn to "read" it on their own—to become self-sufficient viewers—why shouldn't we think about what best stimulates ongoing growth?

According to psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1969), the habit of using one's eyes to learn is acquired early. Arnheim has detailed how sophisticated and thoughtful the process of vision actually is. Beginning in infancy, we learn to recognize, categorize, and sort out all manner of objects, people, activities, and phenomena such as weather, colors or moods. Developmentalists such as Jean Piaget make it clear that we learn all of this from interactions with our concrete and physical environment, which gradually comes to include not just physical elements but also representations of these in images and signs.[1] Most images first shown to us are simple pictures, often used to help us learn language. Over time, we encounter images in many media that go beyond simple representation and include documentary evidence of events, people, and places, as well as stories and material that are open to interpretation. Art is the most complex form of object and imagery. Constructing insightful meaning from it requires more time, focus, effort, thought, and information than is required for the less complicated visual material encountered in the everyday world.

Unfortunately, interactions with art in contemporary culture are minimal and rare in education as well. Visitors often enter museums unprepared for what they find.[2] It makes sense, then, for those of us who are particularly invested in the value of art to maximize any opportunity and to teach in such a way as to increase capacities—and indeed maintain the openness with which naive viewers begin.

One challenge educators face when trying to intervene in ways that prompt the visual learning process, as obvious as it seems, is realizing that not all art is the same. In truth, objects lumped together as art are enormously diverse in content, degree of ambiguity, intention, style, materials, and so forth. Some art tells stories and is full of recognizable or naturalistic depiction. Other is stylized or idealized— both for different reasons. Some art is abstract. Much is dense with information, multi-layered, or symbol-laden, while other art is spare or more about pattern than content. Some art is emotionally expressive, while other is detached or cerebral.

Some is created to challenge and provoke, while other is decorative, designed to please. Some is functional, or at least was in its original context.

These various forms of art are not equally accessible in terms of meaning. The degree of ambiguity varies. Intentions can be obvious or obscure. What is transparent in one culture or at one time may be opaque in another. The meaning and even the purposes of much art, especially art of the past, are speculative and subject to plausible interpretation only by those who have studied it for years. Religious and symbol-laden objects as well as much modern and contemporary art are intended for audiences that share specific information and attitudes, and it remains truly available only to those who gain specific knowledge. In such cases, if we do not know the intentions of the artist or culture, we are left with limited, often mistaken understandings. Clearly, the subjects of some art—war, the subconscious, and sexuality, for example—are more appropriate for adults than children.

If our intention as teachers is to teach viewers to actively construct their own understandings of art—to increase their capacities as viewers—it is useful to recall the analogy to early reading choices. It makes sense to distinguish one kind of art from others and to consider what is most accessible to beginning viewers of different ages and backgrounds. Even though many seem open to anything we present, some objects will be easier to enter and understand.

Beginning in 1991 while at The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City, my colleagues and I initiated a process of considering images that jump-start the journey toward visual literacy. We were guided by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen's research (2000-2001) into the viewing process and her Stages of Aesthetic Development.

The following provides an overview of the first three Aesthetic Stages:

> **Stage I Accountive viewers** are storytellers. Using their senses, memories and personal associations, they make concrete observations about a work of art that are woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color their comments, as viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of its unfolding narrative.

> **Stage II Constructive viewers** set about actively building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional world. If the work does not look the way it is "supposed to"—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subject seems inappropriate— then these viewers judge the work to be "weird," lacking, or of no value. Their sense of what is realistic is the standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, these viewers begin to distance themselves from the work of art.

**Stage III Classifying viewers** adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance. They decode the work using their library of facts and figures, which they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

The information Housen derived from studying viewers' thinking enabled us to link image choices to beginning viewers' interests, strengths, and areas of potential growth. Housen discovered that the majority of museum visitors are in the early stages of aesthetic development and that all viewers follow a trajectory of growth that she describes as aesthetic stages. Beginning viewers, those in Housens's Stages I and II, use a wide range of observations to draw conclusions that are full of associations, memories, facts, and emotions. Our premise was that visual learning would occur when the viewing experience addressed the needs and concerns of viewers and appropriately challenged their abilities. Working with Housen (20002001), we conducted field research, in conjunction with the development of a curriculum called Visual Thinking Strategies, to see if our choices had the desired impact.

The abbreviated suggestions that follow derive from our findings and are meant to aid the selection of images whether thinking about objects highlighted for museum visits or as part of materials prepared for classroom teaching.

## Accessibility

According to Housen, beginning viewers, particularly those in Stages I and II, make sense of what they encounter based on what they already know. They look for narratives in art; their viewpoints are often idiosyncratic and based on personal experience. Thus, one essential requirement for art images introduced to them is accessibility: Are viewers likely to recognize what they observe? Can they make reasonable associations with images based on existing knowledge?

Accessible imagery allows viewers to discover intended meanings on their own. Each encounter leads to successful interpretation, without expert intervention. From this, viewers learn to trust that most art can be interpreted to a meaningful degree through examination, association, and deduction—and that they are capable of this level of interpretation. Pictures should thus include identifiable and reasonably familiar people, actions, interactions, settings, and emotions.

Puzzling beginning viewers intrigues them, but stumping them is not useful. It is important for beginners, especially older ones, to conclude a looking experience thinking that they had legitimate insights. Admittedly, they might miss elements of any given picture, will not "know" art historical information, and might make mistakes in interpretations despite our best efforts to select appropriate images. But all learning involves stages where knowledge is incomplete and understanding limited. Educators in other areas expect the gradual accumulation of skills and knowledge, and it behooves us to be patient as well.

## Captivation

The images should be selected with a particular audience in mind, and choices should be guided by what is likely to intrigue them. There are likely to be differences between adult and child audiences or varying demographics and even locales–city audiences predictably have different knowledge sets than rural ones, and might well have different interests, for example. The point is to find subjects that draw each audience in and sustain its interest. Having "human interest" is a way of describing the sought-after factors.

## Expressive content

Images selected must be open to interpretation: They should contain a number of valid readings, and several possible meanings, even levels of meaning. This allows an intriguing challenge, and it also justifies a range of viable viewpoints, recognizing that characteristic beginning viewer behaviors (again according to Housen) are idiosyncrasy and subjectivity. The more a work is open to interpretation, the more likely the viewer's intuitions will be plausible —that is, within range of the artist's or culture's intentions. At the beginning, images that are quickly captivating and easy to decipher given a surface reading are useful but quickly, as confidence builds and interest in probing increases, pictures that are less clear are appropriate, functioning to encourage speculation, questioning, and complex interpretations.

## Narrative

Housen has found that beginning viewers look for stories in art, even when they are not there. Our selection should, therefore, give them ample opportunity to exercise this skill by providing images in which the artist intended a story to be found. Look for stopped action, dialogues, and pregnant moments, often found in "genre" scenes and images of family, play and work.

**Diversity**

It is very much to the point to include art that is diverse in time and culture, in part because it is important for the beginning viewer to have experience finding meaning in a wide range of art, even if little aware of it. Diversity builds flexibility and an appreciation of humanity's array of creative expression. If presented with a range of styles and themes, beginning viewers become aware of subjects, values, and appearances beyond the viewer's own experience or biases. Art from various times and places allows for history to become concrete, something that gains in importance over time. Variety allows for more people to find their interests, preferences and backgrounds represented. Image selections should, in my view, also be sensitive to gender and racial representation of artists and subjects as well as to environment and ethnicity of the viewers.

Please consider, however, that diversity is an objective, and we should nonetheless always consider each work's relevance to particular viewers' lives. Are viewers likely to be able to identify and accurately understand key elements, based on previous experiences? We want them to apply existing knowledge to figure out what is not known but not leave them with false impressions. If we select carefully—choosing say an African mother and child instead of, say, a power figure—we give beginning viewers a chance to apply what they know about family and love to an object that might be quite foreign in appearance. They construct meaning in keeping with the intentions of the work while practicing decoding a distant visual language.

**Realism**

It stands to reason that varied forms of realism—from naturalism and romanticism to expressionism and some forms of stylization and idealization—are accessible to beginning viewers, stylistically. In the case of photorealism, it depends on how interesting and relevant the subject is. Certain examples of surrealism can be appreciated, especially after some earlier experience with images whose logic corresponds to the "real world."

**Media**

Again, diversity of media leads to flexibility later. Paintings are useful because they are ubiquitous through history and often thought of as the most important artistic medium of a culture. Furthermore, they communicate by several means, including both subject and appearance. And if the need is to create a slide or poster, they reproduce reasonably accurately.

Figurative sculpture is important to include in any museum visit, though only reliefs and pieces intended to be seen from one angle work well in reproduction. Some drawings and prints also reproduce nicely and should be included because, aside from their merit as art, these media illustrate artists' technical processes most visibly. In the case of young people, their studio experience is most likely to be in these media and becomes part of what they apply when looking.

Photographs should be included because in order to become visually literate today, we must all learn to interpret photos. We see great numbers of them, mostly without considering the ways they are used to manipulate responses. In any case, familiarity with photos make them easy to enter and especially accessible to beginning viewers. Photos can also serve as a bridge to understanding what artists do: Beginners know what it is like to look through a camera. Because of this, they can more easily put themselves in the artist's place and consider his or her decisions with relative ease.

## Subjects

Although "genre" scenes and narrative images will dominate for beginning viewers, landscapes, seascapes, town and city views as well as portraits and self-portraits should each be given attention as long as they contain the other elements described above. It should not be assumed that viewers will acknowledge or even appreciate these categories. However, if they are continuously exposed to a range of subjects, the groundwork will be there for conscious awareness and appreciation later.

## Sequences

Once choices are made, it makes sense to put the images in a sequence leading from simpler to more complex. "Simpler images" include those in which there are clearer and fewer possible meanings, fewer details, less density of content. "More complex images" refers to those where there is greater ambiguity of meaning— where ferreting out signifying details is more time consuming, where more of the meaning is communicated through style and materials than through iconography or subject, and where symbolism and metaphor are important.

**Series/themes**

Generally, images should be presented in series, united by some visual element or theme. For beginning viewers, this suggests obvious links, such as mothers and children, people playing or working, rather than a subtle, underlying theme such as joy. It is unlikely that beginning viewers will notice such interconnections. Still, many themes, ideas, subjects and values transcend time and cultures, and such insight will be recognized at some point. Meanwhile, thematic groupings provide a useful organizational logic**.**


**Things to Avoid**

At beginning levels avoid introducing art that requires specialized information if viewers are to find meanings intended by the artist or culture on their own. (By Housen's Stage III viewers want to interpret work analytically using facts and figures; seeking information is itself an intriguing pursuit but it barely factors in before Stage III.) Historical, religious and mythological, and ethnic-specific subjects are generally in this category because of their specificity: There are "correct answers," and misinterpretations can be misleading and intellectually specious.

That being said, there are many cases where the art object tells a story that makes sense even if certain particulars are not surmised or understood in detail. Many myths and historical images may be understood for their drama if not specifics of character and circumstance. Choosing therefore becomes thoughtful discriminating between images that are accessible to a large degree and those that are not. It is perfectly reasonable to test images to find those from which people can draw plausible meanings.

Illustrations, most photojournalism, cartoons and advertisements are seldom productive choices because they allow for only one, or at best, too narrow a range of interpretations.

In general, certain subjects should be avoided, not because they are unimportant or because under some circumstances they cannot be discussed productively, but because public situations involve too many variables to ensure a positive experience. Images depicting violence, specific political stances, specific religious imagery, nudity, overt sexuality and sensuality, and grotesque or macabre subjects may cause beginning viewers difficulty because the values expressed conflict with their own. The point of initial forays into art is not to challenge deeply held views or to force conversation about taboo subjects, but to encourage looking, thinking and the development of well-founded interpretations. Highly charged subjects, experimental techniques, and challenging styles can divert viewers from this focus.

Abstractions are discouraged for beginning viewers not because they dislike them, but because they continue to look for stories—often idiosyncratic and imaginative fantasies—where the artist intends none. Even for adult viewers, early experiences with art remain within the realm of the concrete and the obvious; thinking abstractly is a sophisticated behavior, one that must be grown into.

Still lives are not encouraged because the qualities one appreciates in a still life, like the qualities of an abstract painting, are not the ones that beginners are drawn to explore. Even appreciation of beauty presupposes experience. Similarly, most decorative arts and architecture are difficult for beginning viewers to appreciate because so much of their meaning has to do with either abstract issues (e.g., status, power, wealth, space, proportion) or with the use of materials and craftsmanship that are not the concerns of beginners. Experience and time will eventually lead the viewer to these special areas of art. Again, studying Housen, we can see that from late Stage II onward, all kinds of art are negotiable and attractive to viewers. Taste is by then likely to be a deciding factor in what will most interest the viewer.

## Specific considerations for younger viewers

Very young viewers (up to age 7) are usually satisfied with finding, naming, listing, counting, scouting out—and to some extent making up stories about what they see. Overall, images for them should be fairly simple—even spare—so not to overwhelm. Imagery should be familiar, of course, and clearly rendered to allow for many concrete observations, which is the arena in which they operate. Make it easy for them to identify people (especially children and families), objects, actions, gestures, and expressions. They are not naturally inclined toward reasoning, seeking out levels of meaning, or pulling back and reflecting. Select accordingly.

## For viewers with some experience

During Housen's Stage II, as most adult museum visitors are, viewers are aware of artists and interested in what they think and feel. Images that include artists at work and self-portraits are recommended. It might also be useful to have groups of pictures by single artists to allow viewers to delve into an individual's way of working, choice making, or concerns. Stage II viewers may also be concerned about why things appear as they do, perhaps manifesting this with questions or challenging remarks. Both technique and logic are issues: Things should appear in art as they are "supposed" to be in life. Viewers may be more conservative in their tastes than they were at the beginning, when they were in Stage I; the so-called openness of those Stage I viewers is actually a matter of ignorance, which, as we have been told, is bliss. After some experience, personal tastes, attitudes, and values come into play.

We should respect this if we want to keep viewers searching for meaning in new ways, instead of sidetracking them into arguments about what is right or wrong with a style, technique, or subject. In terms of style, staying within the framework of realist tradition will avoid consternation, but the boundaries can be pushed by way of expressionist works and surrealism.


## Conclusion

The impetus to consider image selection in terms of beginning viewer interests and skills results from Housen's research. Her data open new doors for museum educators. She discovered the strengths of beginning viewers, and we can now make choices building on what people naturally want to do. We can see what capacities can be strengthened and predict what is most likely to produce growth.

In applying Housen's work to museum teaching, one assumption we make is that viewing is best taught by activating learners—helping them look carefully, think about what they see, and articulate their responses to it. This is most productively done in the context of discussions among groups of peers—people with equal experience and exposure to art, who therefore speak the same language. In discussions aided by a facilitator, individuals can overcome their own limitations by sharing observations and insights with others. A group of people brings a breadth of information and experience to the process, even if it is not experience with art. Importantly, the synergy of people adding to each other's observations and bouncing ideas off one another enables a "group mind" to find possible meanings in unfamiliar images much more productively than any individual alone could do. Through group process, the individual's possibilities are enhanced significantly.

By applying Housen's research with regard both to teaching method and image selection, we have been able to produce growth: Students who began as rank beginners grew, by the end of elementary school, to think in the same ways as randomly selected adult visitors at MOMA. In both cases, the norm is Stage II (Housen, 2000-2001). The students are, however, more open and flexible in their approaches to art; they are more observant, and they draw more conclusions, more confidently. They are almost ready for the kind of instruction that has traditionally dominated museum education: the careful, insightful presentation of information. A substantial part of the reason for this development is the choice of images, ones that invite them to become active, thorough, successful viewers.

[1] For a simple introduction to Piaget, see Piaget, J. (1926). The Language and Thought of the Child. New York: Harcourt Brace.

   Although evaluations of what audiences know have been conducted at many institutions, a great deal of data was collected at The Museum of Modern Art, NY while I was director of education in the 1980s. Various reports prepared between 1985-93 are on file at MOMA and document a lack of knowledge about art.

**References**

Arnheim, R. (1969). Visual Thinking. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Housen, A. (2000-2001). Voices of Viewers: Iterative Research, Theory, and Practice. Arts and Learning, 17 (1), 1-21.

**Addendum** (from Guide to Image Selection)

## Specific considerations for younger viewers

Very young viewers (5-7 year-olds) are usually satisfied with finding, naming, listing, counting, scouting out—and to some extent making up stories about what they see. Overall, the pictures should be fairly obvious and simple to allow for students to discuss them insightfully in terms of concrete observations, which is the arena in which they operate. They are not naturally inclined toward reasoning, seeking out levels of meaning, or pulling back and reflecting. Select accordingly. They should be able to interpret images accurately through a process of identifying what they see, including actions, gestures, expressions.

## Imagery

Active and animated, rather than quiet and pensive Fairly spare in terms of how much is depicted People and animals, more than things Having one person or small groups, especially children, families Equal gender representation, as well as racial/ethnic Familiar activities Familiar emotions Values depicted should be shared by students Clear settings Timelessness Colorful, cheerful and positive images will make teachers happy, and

might well be recommended for the children as well

## Technique

Reasonably naturalistic realism

Paintings, drawings (especially in media children use themselves), photographs, folk art

## Diversity

Prioritize close to home, working outward: 25% might be "other"

Art works from other cultures should be highly similar in appearance to the "local" ones Reasonable possibilities include Egyptian, various Asian, Islamic

## Themes

Family, parent(s) and child Play, work, school Love Day/night Seasons

City/town/country/water

**For the slightly more experienced, slightly older**

If they have very little experience with viewing art, most of what was said above still applies. There should be some differences to accommodate growth or age, however. For example, given experience with the VTS, they likely have a strategy for looking and will use it: they are likely to give detailed observations, will listen to other's points of view, and will explain their answers as a matter of course. They will not be content with listing what is concretely before them, but will be filled with stories.

Answering the question "What do you see that makes you say that?" will have given students experience at thinking about their own thoughts, even if they are not conscious of this. This capacity may help prepare them for having second thoughts. They are likely to incorporate interpretations offered by their classmates into their own thinking. In any case, there is justification for selecting images that are more complicated, perhaps slightly more ambiguous, but that still can be "decoded" from the group looking together seriously and searchingly. Some surrealist paintings are suitable—as in Dali, and possibly Magritte where the technique admirably represents the physical world, but the subjects push the imagination.

There may be some paradoxical behavior. On the one hand, students' experience looking may allow them to enjoy pictures with imaginative elements; they will try to penetrate the picture's world. On the other, one may hear comments that compare an image to a student's concept of reality, as well as to the reality they perceive in most photographs—comparisons between what is depicted in an image and a student's concept of how it should be. This is inevitable, and might be played with in terms of picture selection.

While it is too early to push the task of comparing and contrasting, it is wise to include good comparisons in the selection to allow for it to happen naturally.

For classroom materials, include a number of pictures that can be seen in museums and others that were seen earlier years.

**Imagery**

See above re younger children; most of this still applies Slightly increase the density of information, ie. details which contribute to story and may complicate it Increase the number of possible readings, ambiguity, also very slightly

introduce some fantasy and surrealistic elements Stay within the realm of the familiar in all cases Social and family issues can be useful, although teachers sometimes become upset if too much "reality" enters the classroom Avoid any images that might lead to invoking of stereotypes Avoid subjects that get too much play in the popular media, like violence Represent both genders and their interests conscientiously Emphasize images in which the character and personality of people come
richly into play, as well as complex settings, and begin to introduce issues that have to do with time: of day, of year, not so much era

**Technique**

All media that are generally recommended, especially photography Realism still useful, including expressionism, surrealism, stylization

**Diversity**

A wide range of art from many cultures and times Representation of all racial and ethnic groups, being especially sensitive to the mix within the targeted audience

**Themes**

     Students will notice more than previously Comparisons and contrasts helpful

**For viewers with several years of significant experience**

A switch in cognitive operations should be noticeable, making it likely that viewers are less content with subjectivity and personal readings. They may be more concerned about rules—what makes things appear as they do—perhaps expressing this in the form of questions. Some issues that come up for them concern techniques and logic: things should appear as they are "supposed" to be. Viewers may be more conservative in their tastes than they were at the beginning; the so-called openness of beginners is actually a matter of ignorance (bliss...); after some experience, personal tastes, attitudes and values come into play. We should respect this if we want to keep them searching for meaning in new ways, instead of sidetracking them into arguments about what is right or wrong with a style, technique or subject. Values are likely to be of real concern, so this is not the time to challenge their moral or ethical views, as they might lose interest in art, and in the process we have been teaching.

Two specific issues are predictable: craftsmanship and who the artist might be. This is a good time to concentrate on images that address what the artist was either feeling or thinking. Regarding the latter, self-portraits are recommended; it might be useful to have groups of pictures by single artists, to allow them to look more deeply into an individual's way of working, choice-making, concerns. Regarding the former, photographs are useful, given the viewer's familiarity with cameras, and his/her capacity to figure out many aspects of how they were made. Staying within the framework of realist tradition, it will nevertheless be useful to push the boundaries a little technically, too.

**Imagery**

Less active, more pensive, more interior content Sparseness and focus still likely to be helpful in terms of information (less to look at but more to think about than preceding year) Paradox: general cultural statements useful (eg. Robert Frank) and also

intensely personal comments (eg. Kollwitz, Kahlo) Familiarity still important Obvious symbols—like skulls or flags—useful Shared values critically important Add "era" to the pictures in which time is a major concern, less timelessness Sequences by one artist

**Technique**

Realism; avoid "weird" techniques unless making a point Photography, indicating variety of viewpoints and distances from subject, poses vs candids, framing Sequences needed showing divergent styles, craft

**Diversity, culturally**

As above Comparisons of different expressions of similar beliefs useful

**Themes**

Very useful at this juncture, especially pairs that can be compared and contrasted