Visual **Knowing**

Connecting Art and Ideas Across the Curriculum

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EDUCATION

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Introduction: Art and . . .

Art dwells at the core of human endeavor. Since the first humans picked up tools, there has been art – beginning with images sculpted, incised, or painted. We may not know for certain the purposes of the Paleolithic bulls and bison painted in the caves at Altamira, Spain, or Lascaux, France. But we do know that these artworks, dating from 15,000 to 10,000 years B.C., were somehow connected to the lives of these ancient people. They likely were more than mere representations. Many authorities believe that the images were regarded as magical, painted to ensure a successful hunt, for example.

Through the centuries, such connections between art and ideas have been ever present. The purpose of this book is to explore connections between the visual arts specifically and 'ideas' that cut across the school curriculum. If 'art and . . .' were a question, the answer would be 'everything.'

Some art, as we suppose was the case in the prehistoric cave paintings, serves ritualistic purposes, from ancient magic and later religious symbolism to modern counterculture iconography. Two- and three-dimensional images, in other cases, represent or describe reality, fantasy, and all points in between, from the mundane to the sublime. Art provides the currency of ideas.

Busy educators may well ask, Why should I take the time to structure lessons that connect art and ideas? How will so doing make my students better at maths or reading or writing? One answer is that the visual arts offer an alternative cognitive conduit for learning. Most classroom content is understood by students through reading and listening, rather than seeing and doing. Teachers of all subjects – especially those who have noticed

that the visual learners in their classes are struggling, which often can be the case in academic classes – will find that this manner of approaching subject matter offers a pathway to understanding content that is effective for students with various learning styles. As arts education scholar Elliot Eisner at Stanford University puts it: 'One cognitive function the arts perform is to help us learn to notice the world.'[1]

Another answer to the harried educator's question is that connecting art and ideas makes visible the notion of *transference* – that is, the application of knowledge or information gained in one context to some other context. Most teachers have had the frustrating experience of trying to get students to apply a concept that they have supposedly learned in another class to a project or an assignment in their class. Transference is not automatic. Applying knowledge across contexts is a learned skill. Helping students make connections between art and ideas is one strategy for teaching and reinforcing the skill of transference.

All of this is not to say that art is not important in itself and singularly worthy of study: art *as* idea. We do well to remember Swiss painter Paul Klee's (1879–1910) admonition: 'Art does not reproduce what is visible; rather it makes things visible.' Art has the unique quality of being simultaneously communicative and significant both in itself and beyond itself. For example, Picasso's famous mural *Guernica* is a compelling painting for its composition – the use of line and texture, shape and volume – its visual artistry, in other words. But it also conveys and connects to 'ideas,' such as Picasso's outrage at the bombing of the Spanish city of Guernica and thus also to the historical events surrounding the Second World War; and from a perspective of art history, it places Picasso's work in the pantheon of Modern art. Composition, technique, symbolism, history – all are connections between art and ideas.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Ideas are starting points – for thought, discussion, reading, viewing, writing and making. This book is a collection of starting points designed to help teachers and students connect the visual arts to ideas that ripple across the school curriculum.

Most of these starting points can be used in more than one subject. For example, the ideas in Chapter 10, 'Art and Performance,' draw on the work of French writer, artist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau. There are connecting ideas that can be used in instruction related not only to drama (theater, film) but also to a range of subjects, from literature and mythology to religious expression and history. Performance techniques and theater

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technology are other connecting points. Another example – Chapter 6, 'Art and History' – refers to Margaret Bourke-White's post–World War II photographs, which can be starting points for studying history, war, biography, and portraiture, in addition to photographic technique.

Each idea chapter focuses on a featured artist and includes information about other artists, writers, scientists, and so on. Teachers can use the central idea as a theme around which to build one or a series of lessons. And teachers of various subjects can use the same starting points to structure different learning journeys. The intent of the approach is to stimulate instructional creativity rather than to provide a cookbook of preconceived lessons.

In a very real sense, these idea chapters are intended to be brainstorms on paper rather than in-depth treatments of any artist or subject. They should encourage thought, stirring up related ideas simply from reading the chapters and considering their content. But each chapter goes a bit further with the inclusion of Visual Thinking Questions and Suggested Reading.

The Visual Thinking Questions are framed at the teacher level, with the notion that teachers will translate these general questions into a form that their students, at whatever level, can understand. These questions serve as additional starting points, and teachers can develop related questions to further extend the ideas.

Likewise, the books in each chapter's Suggested Reading section, most published later than 1990 (and therefore, hopefully, widely available), are included for the teacher, primarily for background information prior to teaching. But many of the suggested books also are suitable for students, particularly those in higher grades.

Finally, each chapter includes references to images, such as paintings, etchings, sculptures, and photographs. The images referenced in **bold** on first mention denote that the image is available on the Internet. Although all of these images can be found in books, almost universal access to the Internet may provide them more readily. Each chapter's Online Images section makes accessing the images on the Internet a quick and easy way to provide background or develop lessons based on the chapter ideas. Of course, a drawback is that Internet addresses can be ephemeral. All of the image URLs were current at the time of writing. If readers find a dead link, they should be able to locate the image on a different website by using a search engine, such as Google or Dogpile, and entering the title of the work and the artist's name.

A word of caution about the online images: They are intended for reference only. Readers are advised to check for copyright restrictions before downloading or reproducing any of the images.

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Finally, as a further aid to lesson planning and instruction, at the end of this book is an Idea Guide with three sections: a Subject Guide relating the various chapters to major school subject areas (such as English, mathematics, and social sciences), a Keyword Index to ideas that can be found in the various chapters, and an Artist Name Index to help readers find all of the references to the various artists mentioned in the book. Because the chapters are relatively short, the Idea Guide entries are referenced to chapters, rather than individual pages. All of these handy references will be useful in designing effective and thought-provoking lessons that connect the visual arts to subjects across the curriculum.

Note

1. Eisner, Elliot W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 10.

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1 Art and Biography

Few artists better exemplify the connection between art and biography, or autobiography, than the Dutch artist, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). Born in Leiden, where he maintained a studio after leaving the University of Leiden to study painting, Rembrandt belongs to the Baroque period of Dutch art. This era emerged around 1600 as a reaction against the formulaic Mannerist style that dominated the Late Renaissance. Rembrandt was influenced by the paintings of Italian artist Michelangelo Caravaggio (c. 1571–1610), particularly in the dramatic use of light and shadow. Other artists of the Baroque period include Italian sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), and Rembrandt's fellow Dutch painter Jan Vermeer (1632–1675).

Rembrandt is best known for his paintings and etchings in two genres: portraits and scenes of historical events. He became the leading portrait painter of his day in Holland and, in 1631, moved to Amsterdam, where he spent the rest of his life. In the centuries before the invention of photography, many artists made their livelihood by making portraits, usually of wealthy individuals who could afford to pay for such work. Rembrandt extended his fame and fortune by also selling lower-priced etchings, which persons of more modest means could afford. Often the subjects of the etchings were images taken from his paintings. In his time, such etchings were the counterpart of today's posters and postcards that bear the images of famous artworks.

Although Rembrandt painted many individuals' portraits, he was undoubtedly his own favorite model. He often used his own face to study his art. Consequently his many self-portraits form a kind of autobiography. For example, his 1634 **Self Portrait as a Young Man** shows the artist full of

self-confidence at the height of his fame, only three years after his move to Amsterdam. By contrast, the 1660 **Portrait of the Artist at His Easel** shows a careworn Rembrandt nine years before his death, at a time when he was living beyond his means and burdened by massive debt.

Artistic portraits have always served many purposes, from catering to the vanity of their subjects to more lofty aims, such as recording the image of a famous person for posterity. Portraits can range from intimate (some tiny, such as miniatures) to public and even massive, such as **Mount Rushmore,** by sculptor Gutzon Borglum (1867–1941), with its huge heads of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. The most successful portrait artists delve beneath the surface, however. They attempt to portray the essential, not merely the superficial, characteristics of the model. The portraitist tells a story. Thus, portraiture is at its best when it provides a visual biography or at least hints at what lies within the individual.

This is true not only in painting but in other media as well. Examples abound in sculpture, for instance, from the regal 1340 B.C. portrait **Bust of Queen Nefertiti**, wife of the controversial pharaoh Akhenaten, to the standing bronze portrait of French novelist Honoré de **Balzac** (completed 1893–1897) by French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). Even now – long after the advent of photography – drawn, painted, carved, and cast portraits still provide complex images that convey more than everyday photographs can. It should be noted, however, that the best photo portraitists also make penetrating photographic biographies. The outstanding portrait images created by photographer Richard Avedon (1923–2004) provide a body of work to rival the best in portrait painting and are readily accessible in magazines, such as *The New Yorker.*

Many modern artists have found that less realistic styles of portrayal, such as abstract painting, can be more revealing than painting with camera-like realism. A famous abstract portrait example is the weighty image of the writer and art patron as captured in the 1906 **Portrait of Gertrude Stein** by the quintessential Modernist painter, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Many artists in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century produced abstract portraits, including Rodin (mentioned previously), abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), and surrealist Salvador Dali (1904–1989).

A popular form of biographical portraiture in schools is created when students draw or make a collage portrait of themselves or their classmates. Mirror, paper, and pencil are all that a student needs for drawing. But many teachers opt for a freer form of expression, one less dependent on drawing skill. That is *collage*. Collage is a form of artwork that combines various materials to compose a unified image. The materials can be almost anything flat, such as scraps of wallpaper, dried flowers, photographs, clippings from

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newspapers and magazines, bits of fabric or leather, and feathers. These materials are glued to a flat surface to compose the image. Often, students choose images from magazines or personal photo collections – images to which they particularly relate or that convey something about their thoughts and interests. In this way, the collage becomes truly autobiographical.

Collage did not originate as school art. It was invented by the Cubists in 1906, Cubism itself being the creation of Picasso and Georges Braque (1882–1963). From then to the present day, collage has been used in many art styles. There is even an International Museum of Collage, Assemblage, and Construction in Cuernavaca, Mexico (www.collagemuseum.com). A worthwhile online gallery site for modern collagists is Collagetown at www.collagetown.com.

A collage portrait example is **Tatlin at Home** (1920) by artist Raoul Hausmann (1886–1970). The collage is constructed of pasted papers and gouache, a kind of opaque watercolor. Hausmann's subject is the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), the originator of the sculpture movement called C*onstructivism*.

Related to collage is *photomontage*, the combining of photographic images in collage fashion. Hausmann, indeed, claimed to have invented photomontage. But the technique has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of photography. In fact, making composite photographs was a popular Victorian era amusement. But it was not until the 1920s that photomontage developed as a truly new art form. The center of this development was Berlin, where a group of artists calling themselves *Dada* (a founding member being Hausmann) found a new means of expression that rebelled against the prevailing current of abstraction but did not revert to traditional figurative work.

Finally, there is the humorously biographical portrait technique called *caricature*. Caricaturists exaggerate the features of the model to point out particular characteristics. Often, it is the characteristics that make the model stand out. One of the leading caricaturists was Al Hirschfeld (1903–2003), who worked for the *New York Times* for 70 years and produced some of the most memorable caricatures of famous people over nearly the whole span of the twentieth century. An example is his 1955 **Cleveland Amory Scratching His Head at Typewriter**.

VISUAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Artists and writers who have known (or sometimes only known of) one another often have created biographies in different ways. Gertrude Stein wrote a biography of Pablo Picasso, and Picasso painted Stein's

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portrait. Rodin sculpted Balzac. What other pairings of artists and writers can be found? What are the characteristics of the resulting visual and literal biographies? What are the commonalities, the differences?

2. Choose a biographical portrait – for example, Hausmann's *Tatlin at Home* – and consider it closely. What characteristics of the model can be identified from the portrait? Can these characteristics be confirmed by reading about the subject of the work?

3. Rembrandt's autobiographical self-portraits trace his life. Choose several of the dated self-portraits and match them to what was happening in Rembrandt's life at each point. Are there other figures whose portraits or self-portraits can be used in this manner? (Consider the portraits of public figures.)

SUGGESTED READING

Poggi, Christine. (1993). *In defiance of painting: Cubism, futurism, and the invention of collage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Schama, Simon. (1999). *Rembrandt's eyes.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
Zinsser, William. (1998). *Inventing truth: The art and craft of memoir.* Boston: Mariner Books.

ONLINE IMAGES

Balzac (Rodin)
www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/rodin/balzac1.jpg
Bust of Queen Nefertiti (Egypt, 1340 B.C.)
pavlov.psyc.queensu.ca/~psyc382/nefertitiside.html
Cleveland Amory Scratching His Head at Typewriter (Hirschfeld)
www.alhirschfeld.com (search by title)
Mount Rushmore (Borglum)
www.travelsd.com/parks/rushmore/photos.asp
Portrait of Gertrude Stein (Picasso)
www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/257bg.jpg
Portrait of the Artist at His Easel (Rembrandt)
www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/self/self-1660.jpg
Self Portrait as a Young Man (Rembrandt)
www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/self/self-1634.jpg
Tatlin at Home (Hausmann)
faculty.dwc.edu/wellman/Hausmann.htm

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