



Inquiry about Contextual Inquiry



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.

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.

References:

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