



More about Interpretive and Planning Inquiry



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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