



Visual Understanding in Education
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Housen's Theory and Decorative Arts Education

by Philip Yenawine

The most useful information I have encountered during my thirty years as a museum educator has been that produced by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist whose research and theories focus on art. Housen was initially intrigued by the observation that some people know nothing about art while others are experts; since experts were once naive, they must have undergone many changes as their capacities and stores of information grew. Housen wanted to understand the nature of those changes: how, when, and why do aesthetic processes and concepts develop? Since the mid-1970s, she has conducted many careful, detailed studies to explore these questions, and her interpretations of findings have serious implications for museum education.

Housen began her research by observing the behaviors of museum visitors. Soon she wanted to know what thoughts motivated those behaviors. As her interest built, she realized that understanding the spectrum of viewers would involve studying people of diverse ages, backgrounds, educations, and economic levels, not just those who visit museums.

In collecting information concerning this range of viewers, Housen paid particular attention to the practices of developmental psychology. Examining her data, she began to believe that a stage theory—often the result of developmental research—could be applied to aesthetic change. She examined various writings on aesthetics and perception, and found that her growing insights resonated with the findings of others. She also discovered that while the thoughts of experienced viewers were often studied and discussed in the literature, those of naive viewers were less understood.

After nearly five years of research to develop a methodology, collect data, interpret findings, and begin drawing theoretical conclusions, Housen published a study on the subject of aesthetic development in 1979. She went on to conduct further tests of her method, collect additional profiles, and make more detailed analyses of findings. In 1983 she submitted her doctoral thesis, which included a “coding manual” that detailed her method of analyzing aesthetic thought, to the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The manual is a compendium of the range of thoughts collected from interviews with individuals viewing works of art. A thought is categorized in two ways: first, according to its specific characteristics, and then according to its context in patterns of thinking. Housen also presented a well-documented theory of how aesthetic thinking progresses through stages.

Housen's primary data collection tool is a non-directive, stream-of-consciousness interview. Participants are asked simply to talk about anything they see as they look at a work of art, to say whatever comes into their minds. There are no directed questions, or other prompts to influence the viewer's process. Called the Aesthetic Development Interview, or ADI, this provides Housen with a window into a person's thinking processes. In addition to being empirical, it minimizes researcher biases or assumptions.

After a very detailed, thought-by-thought analysis, Housen studies each interview as a totality to see how individual thoughts fit into an overall context. Finally, she factors in demographic, attitudinal and biographical information about each interviewee, as well as her/his responses to specific questions. From all of this, she is able to assign an aesthetic stage to the interview. To date, Housen and her associates have coded over 6,000 ADIs taken from individuals ranging from six-year-old children to eighty-something adults of both genders; these people run the spectrum in terms of art experience, race, ethnicity, education, and economic status.

A wide variety of art has been used for the ADIs but virtually all of it has been in the categories of painting, sculpture, and the like: works that have what I refer to as "expressive content". Emotional content is usually embedded alongside more objective information. Ambiguity and layers of meaning leave room for multiple interpretations. The data, therefore, are less certainly applicable to viewers' experience of works of decorative arts than to these other categories.

Over the course of years, Housen has identified five distinct patterns of thinking about art which she described as 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 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 that 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.

Stage IV

Interpretive viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the work and letting its meaning slowly unfold, they appreciate subtleties of line and shape and color. Now, critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let underlying meanings of the work—what it symbolizes—emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

Stage V

Re-creative viewers, having a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now “willingly suspend disbelief.” A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level but also existing on an elevated plane. As in all important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage V viewers to know the ecology of a work—its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

Significant to understanding aesthetic development is that, while growth is related to age, it is not determined by it. A person of any age with no experience with art will necessarily be in Stage I; an adult will not be at a higher stage than a child simply by virtue of age. A good education does not insure a higher stage, unless it has involved direct experience with visual art. Exposure to art over time is the only way to develop, and without time and exposure, aesthetic development does not occur.

Over the course of her studies, Housen has found that most interviewees are beginner viewers, in Stages I and II. Even among frequent museum goers, there are relatively few people who have had sufficient interaction with art to have developed beyond the understandings of Stage II/III (which is a transition between two stages, II and III). Very few are Stages III and beyond, and virtually all of these are arts professionals of one sort or another. Housen's refers to the majority of the Stage I and II viewers as “beginners” because their behaviors lie below a threshold of literacy that one might call “functional”. They have a still-limited ability to find meaning in a range of art; they are short of the kind of fluency that, in reading, would be represented by flexibility in understanding and enjoying prose, poetry and expository writing of varying styles and content.

Given that the research has been conducted without a focus on the decorative arts, what conclusions may we draw from the data to guide thinking about education in this area? One helpful insight results from a study among elementary students who were in a long-term study of aesthetic development and its transfer. In this instance, in addition to ADIs, students looked at other kinds of objects (mostly artifacts: a foreign coin, a mortar and pestle, an anemometer, a fossil) and were asked open-ended questions about what they saw. Over the course of the five-year study, students grew from a mean score of Stage I to a mean of Stage II, with half of the students therefore in the upper reaches of Stage II, and some of them in the transition stage, Stage II/III. All the while, students showed growth in their viewing skills as applied to “expressive art”. There was, however, no consistent, general transfer of these viewing skills to

objects of material culture until Stage II; before that Stage, there were minor indications that some progress was being made, but nothing significant. This suggests that, before Stage II, the viewing skills most helpful for appreciating decorative arts are nascent, though not clearly in place.

Looking at this phenomenon in light of the stage descriptions above is illuminating. Stage I viewers' strength is using random and relatively sparse observations, all based on prior knowledge of their world (which has included little or no art), to draw some kind of story from an image. They do this no matter what they examine: paintings by Hopper or Cezanne, African figures, abstractions. As a meaning-making system, this has limited usefulness with many of the things studied in decorative arts, though to the extent that furniture and decorative artifacts tell a story, or do so in the context in which they are seen, the instinctual behaviors of Stage I viewers can reasonably apply.

Stage II viewers bring many more interests and skills to the experience of viewing decorative arts. They are impressed by craftsmanship. They become interested in how things come to look as they do, and, at some point, in how they are made. Elements of design slowly develop as interests for Stage II viewers. Questions of function can intrigue. This is a very "educable" stage.

Stage III is where matters of classification, maker, history, and condition become the focus of the viewer, and it is at this stage that such data become memorable. Before this point, although it is possible for the motivated to memorize facts, information is not necessarily used well by the viewer. It might well be misunderstood and misapplied. Information might help one make sense of one thing, but not necessarily others.

Serious connoisseurship, such as being able to assign quality with assurance, understand deeper implications of a given work or style, and converse deeply and broadly about the meanings of objects and their contexts, does not happen before Stage IV.

Housen and I have worked together for almost ten years, developing a teaching strategy that applies her theories to teaching. The program we have designed is called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). The VTS is designed to address the interests and strengths of viewers in Stage I and early Stage II, and to follow their developmental arc, supporting and challenging them appropriately. For example, in order to make the most of beginning viewers' storytelling facility, the VTS emphasizes narrative art at the outset. The teaching method centers on questions: what is going on in this image? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find? Teachers are taught ways of responding to student comments supportively and facilitating the ensuing discussions.

The VTS is being used in museums and in schools with impressive results not only in developing viewing skills but also in advancing other thinking and communication skills. The results indicate that students can be functioning in Stage II as early as fifth grade, and therefore are primed for programs that focus on the decorative arts. Elsewhere in this publication, you will find educators discussing their use of the VTS in the teaching programs of decorative arts institutions, tailoring it to assist with specific goals of their programs.