

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

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<http://ijea.asu.edu>

ISBN 1529-8094

Volume 8 Number 1

February 6, 2007

Articulating Aesthetic Understanding Through Art Making¹

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Citation: Costantino, Tracie. (2007) Articulating aesthetic understanding through art making. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 8(1). Retrieved [date] from <http://ijea.asu.edu/v8n1/>.

Abstract

In this article I will present case study research of an elementary school art teacher who provided both verbal and visual means for students to respond to art while on a museum field trip. I will focus on how the students' drawings from memory and artwork in their sketchbooks present compelling articulations of their understandings of certain artworks. I will also discuss how their reflective writing about the field trip supports and elaborates on their visual articulation, and how the students' works are manifestations of qualitative reasoning, visual thinking, and imaginative cognition (Efland, 2004) in addition to linguistic thinking. Through this discussion, I hope to illustrate the essential role of image-based, nonlinguistic thinking (as in visual thinking, qualitative reasoning, and imagination) in interpreting and expressing understanding of works of art.

Introduction

The Oxford English dictionary (Brown, 1993) defines the verb *articulate* as: "Pronounce distinctly; give utterance to; express in words; express clearly and fluently" and "Make distinct

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Imagination in Education Research Group annual conference in Vancouver, B. C., July 2006.

to sight, etc.” Both of these definitions are relevant to art criticism and interpretation as they emphasize the importance of clear and fluent expression, whether verbal or visual (i.e., “distinct to sight”). In K-12 art education, engaging in art criticism has primarily meant talking or writing about art. Terry Barrett (2003), in his recent book on interpreting art, identifies talking or writing about art as critical components of the interpretive process: “to interpret a work of art is to understand it in language” (p. 198).

However, there is also a long tradition of artists responding to works of art through art making. Artists typically make sketches or drawings of works by other artists that inspire or challenge them; they may later incorporate these drawings into an artwork. Artists also make finished works that appear to be in direct dialogue with specific works of other artists, as in Rembrandt’s *Self-portrait* (1640, National Gallery, London) in which the artist leans his right arm on a ledge with his elbow jutting out at the viewer. This pose echoes that in Titian’s *Portrait of a Man* (1508-10, National Gallery, London). This type of artistic response articulates the artist’s understanding of the work under study, whether the artist is interpreting the compositional structure, examining an evocative gesture, or responding to the work’s metaphoric content. It relies on visual thinking and qualitative reasoning as well as linguistic thinking, which may occur throughout the cognitive process but especially when the artist is reflecting on or sharing the ideas that compose the artwork and its making. It is important to emphasize that in addition to linguistic thinking, visual and qualitative thinking play a significant role in interpretation.

There is a substantial body of research and theoretical literature explicating the cognitive sophistication of visual thinking—that is, the intelligence of perception and the role of images in concept formation (e.g., Arnheim, 1969; Zeki, 1999; and see Efland, 2004). The perception of a work of art is essentially interpretive, and the creation of a work of art is dependent on visual thinking and qualitative reasoning—the manipulation of non-linguistic percepts and concepts that are based in sensory stimuli and emotion (Arnheim, 1969; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1994, 2002). Since a primary goal of art criticism in art education is to develop students’ ability to construct reasoned and meaningful interpretations of art, it seems important not to restrict the interpretive process solely to linguistic thinking and articulation, but include opportunities for visual thinking and qualitative reasoning through art making to fully express one’s understanding of an artwork (see, for example, Emme, 2001). By utilizing visual and verbal modes of thought, the student would be engaged in the highest levels of cognition.

□ In this article I will present case study research of an elementary school art teacher who provided both verbal and visual means for students to respond to art while on a museum field trip. I will focus on how the students’ drawings from memory and artwork in their sketchbooks present compelling articulations of their understandings of certain artworks. I will also discuss how their reflective writing about the field trip supports and elaborates on their visual articulation, and how the students’ works are manifestations of qualitative reasoning, visual thinking, and imaginative cognition (Efland, 2004) in addition to linguistic thinking. Through this discussion, I hope to illustrate the essential role of image-based, nonlinguistic thinking (as in

visual thinking, qualitative reasoning, and imagination) in interpreting and expressing understanding of works of art.²

The case study to be discussed herein was part of a larger, multiple case study project investigating the role of curriculum and pedagogy on students' aesthetic experiences while visiting an art museum with their art teacher (Costantino, 2005). In the case discussed in this article, art teacher Carl Connelly guided fifth and sixth grade students from the Falcon Elementary School³ in the Chicago Public School district through The Art Institute of Chicago. I am focusing on particular findings and issues from the case study, specifically how Carl's approach to visiting the museum reflects his philosophy of teaching art through apprenticeship, in his modeling for the students how an artist engages in visual dialogues with artworks through sketching and drawing, and verbal dialogues by note taking and discussion with other people. Influenced by this pedagogical approach, students created sketches, drawings, and written reflections that represent their engagement with certain artworks. These visual articulations express their understanding and interpretations of the artwork and are visual representations of their aesthetic experience, when aesthetic experience is defined hermeneutically as interpreting or constructing meaning of a work of art (Gadamer, 1960/2000; Parsons, 2002).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This study employed a naturalistic instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995). I used a variety of qualitative methods to understand the nature of students' experiences encountering works of art at the Art Institute, and how that experience was mediated by pedagogy and curriculum. I acted as a participant-observer of the classroom lessons that preceded and followed the field trip to the museum, making sure to observe the entire unit that related to the field trip and additional lessons in order to get a sense of the classroom dynamic, and the teacher's pedagogical style and approach to art education curriculum. I was also a participant-observer on the field trips to the museum. I was somewhat involved in the classroom and on the field trip as a way to interact informally with the students, for example, I helped to pass out and collect materials and spoke to students about their art projects or the artwork they saw at the museum.

I was more participant than observer on the field trip with Falcon students as these field trips were structured so that students could talk freely with others about the artwork on view. This gave me an opportunity to speak with a number of students about their ideas about specific works of art, providing rich data for the study regarding how students constructed meaning of works of art. My observations were recorded by audiotape and written field notes.

² I am grateful to the external reviewer that encouraged me to clarify my emphasis on the role of visual thinking in interpreting art, not to the exclusion of linguistic thinking, but in partnership.

³ Except for the museum and school district, all place and personal names have been changed to protect participants.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the art teacher, a purposeful sample of students, and the classroom teacher that attended the field trip. The students were selected according to observations I made during the field trip and according to their responses to an open-ended reflective writing prompt, choosing students that seemed to have a significant reaction to the experience, whether positive or negative. The classroom teacher administered the writing prompt the day of the field trip. This prompt also asked students to draw their ideas, as desired. In addition to these drawings, I took photographs of student artwork that related to the unit in which the field trip occurred. In this way, I collected data on students' experiences using a variety of expressive modes—oral, written, and visual/artistic. In addition to interviewing the art teachers, I collected related documents as available, including lesson plans, instructional materials, and student sketchbooks. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

The data were analyzed using coding and categorization methods (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Considering the often ineffable quality of aesthetic experience, I also analyzed how students and teachers used metaphor to describe experience (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Students' drawings were analyzed by asking specific questions, such as what is the student focusing on (composition, color, figure, etc.), what media are used, and how closely does it approximate the original work of art? By asking these questions I developed interpretations of the focus of the drawing and what this may imply about the student's interest in the original artwork, and how they might have changed the original artwork, which implied a visual interpretation of the original work by the student. All of these possible interpretations contributed to my understanding of the nature of students' experiences of specific artworks, combined with their written and oral responses from other data sources (i.e., the writing prompt and interview).

The use of several methods for data collection (observations, interviews, reflective writing (with drawing), and photographs) and analysis (coding and categorization, use of metaphor, document analysis) helped to triangulate (or to use Denzin and Lincoln's term, to crystalline) the findings, providing "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth" to the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). Member checking occurred at the end of each interview to insure that my interpretations adequately reflected the speaker's intended meanings. The teacher was asked to review a draft of the written case study to further inform my interpretations and analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the larger study was grounded in the aesthetic theories of John Dewey (1934) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2000), which assert the educational nature of aesthetic experience. Both philosophers describe aesthetic experience as a constructed event between the work of art and the viewer. An interpretive, meaning-making process is the central activity of this event, which occurs through perception. For Dewey, emotion is the "cementing force" (Dewey, 1934, p. 42) that makes the experience memorable and productive, cultivating growth, which he considers central to education. "Education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth" (Dewey, 1916, p. 51). For Gadamer (1960/2000), the

experience is dialogic, an ongoing interpretive exchange between the viewer and the work of art that results in a disclosure of meaning:

And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience (Erfahrung) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, certainly different from that sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and indeed from all conceptual knowledge—but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth? (p. 98)

This study applied the aesthetic theories of Dewey and Gadamer to provide a framework for the kind of meaning-making process, or learning, that might occur during student interactions with works of art in a museum setting.

Gadamer also asserted the essential linguisticity of understanding. He stressed that it is only by articulating ideas in language that understanding is achieved “...language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (1960/2000, p. 389). Gadamer’s emphasis on language in thinking reflects a longstanding tradition. Dewey, however, anticipates current research on the non-linguistic forms of thinking and the role of the body in cognition throughout his writing, most notably in *Art as Experience* (1934), “The existence of art... is proof that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense-organs, and muscular system” (p. 25). Indeed Dewey described thinking in terms of qualities (qualia)—which occurs during artmaking and results in artistic expression of ideas—as one of the most sophisticated modes of thought. “To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical” (p. 46).

Dewey also provides a kind of explanation of visual thinking in this book, admirable for its foresight before the cognitive revolution of the 1950s began to focus on the role of images in cognition. In this case, he is discussing the need for the viewer to undergo a perceptive act of reconstructive doing.

For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent... The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. In both, there is comprehension in its literal signification—that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole. (p. 54)

Dewey’s description of the artistic process relates to what we know about cognition. The cognitive psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1969) defines cognition as “active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context” (p. 13). This occurs through language as well as images. In this same paragraph, Arnheim asserts

the intelligence of perception "...the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself" (p. 13). Visual thinking, then, is the process of identifying, categorizing, and generating images that are the foundation of all thinking. According to Arnheim, these images are directly perceived, as well as generated to refer to kinds of qualities, objects, and events, and stored in memory as visual concepts (p. 294). In visual thinking, the mind manipulates these visual concepts, directly perceived as well as from experience and the imagination (creation of images that are not necessarily observable or from memory), in the cognitive processes described by Arnheim above. The artistic process of manipulating the elements and principles of design, such as line and color, to express a concept in two or three-dimensional form is an example of visual thinking. The visual symbols or icons (the iconography) of an artwork are the result of visual thinking also, as conceptual metaphors become articulated visually and materially (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Parsons, in press). The interpretation of the resulting work of art through perception requires visual thinking as the viewer analyzes how the arrangement and physical handling of the formal and symbolic elements of an artwork convey meaning.

Building on Dewey's ideas of thinking in terms of qualities in *Art as Experience*, Elliot Eisner expands on the concept of qualitative reasoning, especially in *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered* (1994) and *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), to describe the character of non-linguistic thinking that creating and responding to art entails. Qualitative reasoning is similar to visual thinking, but emphasizes the influence of emotion on our perception. What is particularly relevant to this study is Eisner's discussion of the transformation that occurs when a student tries to verbally articulate his or her understanding of a visual expression. The student must use analogy, for a literal equivalent is not possible, and this insistence on analogy is another example of higher order thinking (2002, see p. 121-122). Therefore, regarding this study, there was the potential for more meaning making, or learning, for both the student-artist and for myself as researcher-viewer in the students' combined verbal and visual articulations of their understanding of artworks.⁴

Based on recent theories of cognitive psychology and neurobiology that emphasize the critical, foundational role of images and metaphor in cognition, art educator Arthur Efland (2004) offers the term imaginative cognition to describe the thinking involved in creating and interpreting works of art. He defines imagination as

...the act or power of forming mental images of what is not actually present to the senses, or what has not actually been experienced. It is also the power of creating new ideas or images through the combination and reorganization of images from previous experiences. (p. 771)

⁴ I am indebted to Richard Siegesmund's (2004, 2005) writing on Eisner's theories of qualitative reasoning and non-linguistic thinking for highlighting the cognitive demands (through use of analogy and metaphor) of transforming qualitative reasoning into linguistic expression. Through his research Siegesmund demonstrates how qualitative reasoning and linguistic expression cooperate in a sophisticated learning cycle.

In this definition, one can see how the students' interpretive drawings required the use of the imagination (creating new ideas or images through combination and reorganization) and why it is important to give students an opportunity to articulate understanding visually through art making, in addition to linguistically. It provides another avenue for higher order thinking.

Michael Parsons (in press), building on Efland (2002), illustrates how metaphors can be visually based, and are not essentially linguistic. Using Lakoff's and Johnson's (1980, 1999) definition of a metaphor as "mapping the qualities of something in one domain onto another domain," Parsons interprets Bierstadt's painting *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains* as a metaphor.

The majesty of this painting, produced by the towering size of the mountains, the tranquility of the scenery, and the patterns of light and color in the clouds, and the suggestion of the sun, unseen, may be said to be a metaphor for the glory of God.... We could say the Bierstadt maps the qualities of Nature onto its Maker, which would be a straight metaphor.

To further elucidate, Parsons uses the terms metonymy and simile, but emphasizes "all of these amount to mapping the qualities of the painting onto the idea of God, something that does not need to be put into words in order to be appreciated." He applies this reasoning to other visual expressions, including an example from popular culture: the automobile advertisement that features a pretty woman with the automobile. "It is clearly grounded in the metaphorical thought that, in some unspecified way, the car is like a pretty woman. The literal reading, of course, would be that a woman is leaning on an automobile."

I quote Parsons at length to emphasize the metaphoric quality of art and visual culture—that they may be visual metaphors that may be interpreted visually and not solely linguistically, to underscore the importance of providing opportunity for visual means of interpretation *in addition to* verbal.

Efland's theory of imaginative cognition is also important for its emphasis on imagination as an essential aspect of art and art education, and its relevance for general education. Based on the research in cognitive psychology and neurobiology that describe the cognitive sophistication of visual thinking, the fundamental role of metaphor (visual and verbal) in concept formation and understanding, and the cognitive demands of imagination, which he carefully outlines, Efland asserts, "Education should have as its ultimate purpose the maximization of the cognitive potential of individuals, and this includes the use of the imagination—in all subjects to be sure but certainly in the arts" (p. 770).

Both Efland (2004) and Siegesmund (2005) discuss how imaginative cognition and qualitative reasoning may be implicit in an art teacher's curricular objectives and approach to instruction, but should be made explicit for students to fully benefit from the cognitive demands of making and responding to art. Carl Connelly's approach to art education and a tour of The Art Institute of Chicago is an example of implicit attention to imaginative cognition and qualitative reasoning and that with more explicit attention, more students may have experienced the cognitive challenge of visually articulating their understanding of specific works of art.

Artist as Teacher: An Introduction to Carl Connelly as Art Teacher

“Every work of art is a child in its time.” —Wassily Kandinsky

Upon entering Carl Connelly’s art room at the Falcon School, one is greeted by art. Student art and posters of art from the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) adorn almost every available surface in the room from floor to ceiling. The AIC posters have labels below them giving the artist’s name and the title of the work. On a blackboard running along one wall of the room is a beautiful colored chalk drawing of a large tree ablaze in fall foliage, welcoming the students back to school. The remaining walls have numerous metal storage closets holding current student work and art supplies. There is also a large cart on wheels stacked with organized piles of art supplies in the front of the room giving the impression that the supplies are available for students to use as they need them. Windows decorated with green plaid curtains spread along the top half of one wall, and bookcases filled with books and videos stand against the front and back walls. A computer is in the back of the room; the screen saver exclaims, “Welcome artists!!! Let’s do some great art!!” There is also a scanner, printer, TV with VCR, and cassette player in the room. Carl plays classical music on this player when the students are working on projects (he plays jazz during the art club after school). The students sit at tables arranged like the letter W, with the top of the letter facing Carl’s desk in the front of the room.

With the abundance of artwork— student and professional—variety of art materials, and classical music playing, the art room resembles both an artist’s studio (with its artistic, material, and musical inspiration) and a gallery showcasing Carl’s long career as an art teacher. He has been teaching art in this room for a long time (he has been at Falcon School almost 30 years, not all of them spent in this room), and one senses this history in what seems like a combined permanent and rotating collection of artwork. It is important to clarify that the student work displayed is both current and from years ago. Carl uses work from both categories to point things out to students or to encourage them to be inspired by work he thinks is particularly successful.

The Kandinsky quote transcribed at the start of this section is displayed in the back of the room on a black metal cabinet; it is hand written with special attention paid to the word “child”. This quote is an apt expression of Carl’s approach to teaching art to the students at Falcon, which revolves around the concept of artist—artist as teacher, student as artist, and curriculum as knowledge of great artists. Carl is a painter and upon retirement in a few years he plans to focus on his professional artistic career. In the summers he teaches art to adults in a resort community where he described using an apprentice model for teaching participants how to paint, using his own paintings as examples and modeling techniques. It seems this would be his preference for teaching art—the apprentice model established in the guild system of the Middle Ages and the academies of the Renaissance, where the teacher is a master artist and the students learn by working with art materials, studying great works of art, and eventually, hopefully, creating their own masterpiece that will earn them the title of master artist.

In a sense, the examples of student work hung in the room are evidence of prior apprentices' masterpieces. This does not mean, however, that Carl emphasizes the art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance in his classroom—the majority of posters represent art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, the billboard outside his classroom is covered with newspaper clippings of art exhibitions in the Chicago area focusing on art from the Renaissance to present day. The significant point is that Carl's approach to teaching art emphasizes artists more than art materials, political, personal, or social issues. Carl considers teaching the elements and principles of design using a variety of media to be important, but he approaches this by using the work of professional artists as exemplars. For example, Carl shared with me a binder of student work he has kept as a kind of portfolio of his teaching—there were numerous examples of student work done in the style of a specific artist or movement, such as a pointillist painting or a surrealist painting inspired by Magritte. In some cases, the assignment may have been to copy a painting, as in these works inspired by Toulouse Lautrec (Figure 1). Copying the work of great artists is a significant part of the apprentice model of art teaching.

In other cases, the work of professional artists is used as a jumping off point for students' original compositions, such as pastel drawings of flowers that were inspired by the work of Odilon Redon and Georgia O'Keeffe. While Western European art dominates the classroom decoration (and the field trip to the Art Institute), during the semester I observed in Carl's classroom, students were also working on projects inspired by the art of Ancient Egypt for a history fair, and had made clay sculptures inspired by art from the Ancient Americas.



Figure 1. Student art in the style of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Relating to the metaphor of student as artist, Carl said that he chose the Kandinsky quote to display in his room, out of many that he looked through, for this reason:

Kandinsky is one of my favorite "free spirits". It tells me every artwork is contemporary and current as the artist creates and gives it life. A few out of all the art that is created become timeless. Even those created in my classroom. I'm not sure my students, as young as they are, can benefit much from the quotes. Some do. But the quotes are a constant reminder for me, and this helps me help the students create quality and imaginative pieces.

Kandinsky is emphasizing the genesis of each work of art, that it is a product of its time, born of the sociocultural influences of which the artist is immersed—as Dewey said, the *genius loci* of its creation (1934, p. 9). Carl acknowledges that each work of art created reflects its sociocultural environment (“contemporary and current”), but there are a few that transcend the situation of their creation to become timeless. There is an implication that these few artworks are special, that timelessness is a mark of great artistic achievement. While Carl acknowledges the postmodern insistence on the relevance of context, his valuing of a timeless quality to art reflects a traditional, transhistorical aesthetics (Crowther, 2002).

By emphasizing the word “child” in his reproduction of the Kandinsky quote, Carl is making an overt connection between a work of art and the students themselves, as if reassuring them that they, too, can create great works of art characterized by quality and imagination. Carl’s use of these adjectives reflects his modernist curricular objectives for the kinds of work students should create—he prioritizes quality and imagination, as opposed to, for instance, socially or personally relevant work, or critical or multicultural work. These also might be objectives for him, but they are not immediately named. Carl’s prioritizing of quality, imagination, and timelessness, and the emphasis on art history in the curriculum place him more within the tradition of aesthetic education, what Carl referred to as a “humanities approach”.

Carl’s statement that students could create timeless works of art reflects his belief in their potential and his aim to encourage his students to reach their potential. He does this by fostering their independence on numerous levels. His vision of the student as artist, which was introduced above in Carl’s use of the apprentice model of teaching, is also further illustrated during the field trip.

The Field Trip

To prepare for the field trip, Carl spent one class period making sketchbooks and modeling how to find information about a work of art by looking at gallery wall text. He used the posters in his room and throughout the school to demonstrate this practice (for a full discussion of the preparation see Costantino, 2005). The sketchbooks consisted of two sheets with checklists and four sheets of blank paper in between a piece of cardboard and a piece of colored construction paper for a cover. One of the checklists gave students clues for finding different kinds of art, for example, a sculpture made of steel, or a painting using the color purple, or a chalk drawing. The students would then write the title and artist on the line next to the clue. The

second checklist is a list of artists' names—the students find work by these artists and record the title on the sheet. All of the artists on the list are American or European and from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The tour covered mostly nineteenth and twentieth century American and European art. Carl encourages the students to use the blank sheets to take notes or make sketches. For Carl, the sketchbook helps the students to focus and encourages them to be motivated to take notes or make sketches according to their own interest—he will not assign a project based on this field trip. It is also a means for making the experience more authentic as he stresses to the students that artists bring sketchbooks to museums to record their ideas and impressions.

Carl's approach to the tour was to bring students into a gallery, introduce them to the kind of work in the gallery with just a few words ("This gallery has paintings by the French Impressionists. There are a lot of paintings by Monet, Renoir."), and then let them look on their own. He might point something out to a few students, answer a student's question, or talk about the work with the classroom teacher. He discussed a few works with the class together as a group; these included Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*, Picasso's *Old Guitarist* and Chagall's *America Windows*. At the Seurat, Carl explained pointillism and emphasized how long it took the artist to make the painting. At the Picasso, he explained how there was an earlier composition underneath the current one and why this piece came from Picasso's Blue Period. At the Chagall, he asked students to discover why the title of the work was *America*. The students quickly found the image of the Statue of Liberty and then they moved on.

He discussed a few other works with students that happened to be near him, including Clyfford Still's *1951-52*, Pollock's *Greyed Rainbow*, and Rothko's *Painting*. At the Still, which is a large abstract canvas covered predominantly in black with a sliver of red-orange in the lower left corner, Carl asked students to describe what they saw in the painting. Here are some of their responses: "Blood coming down;" "a cave in the dark;" "a dark place;" "an Oreo cookie;" "inside part of an eyeball." Carl didn't ask the students why they had these ideas, but encouraged their free-flowing images. Carl then described what he saw, "I see a cliff with rocks and then I see the sun coming up. Do you see that part with the red on it?" At the Rothko, which has abstract fields of vibrating orange and yellow, Carl shared how he likes to look at this painting, "I like to stand right in the middle – stand right in the middle – and let the painting just go all around me. It's like, it makes me feel warm and it makes me feel peaceful." Carl was modeling a kind of somatic experience with the painting in which he felt immersed. Throughout the tour, Carl modeled what adults and artists do when they visit a museum—they stroll through galleries, stopping to look at, discuss, and perhaps sketch works that are interesting to them.

This independent time was facilitated by the sketchbooks, which gave the students a task to accompany looking, and especially the opportunity to engage with an adult in discussion about an artwork. In order to try to capture students' discussion, I made myself available to students who wanted to talk about a work of art. If I saw a student or group of students focused on an object, I would join them and ask them what they thought about it. I only had to do this a few times at the beginning of the tour, as I soon had a regular group of students wanting to share their

ideas with me as we entered each gallery. It became almost like a game to them. As soon as we entered a gallery they would scan the room for an object that caught their eye and then they would try to “figure it out.” One boy typically read the label and then created an interpretation based on the title. Others would look at the object first, state their ideas, and then look at the label to see if they were “correct”—if the title was at all similar to their interpretation, they were pleased. I tried not to probe students’ comments, as I was trying to understand the influence of Carl’s teaching and curriculum, but this prevented the opportunity to model for these students the benefits of extended looking at an artwork. With the somewhat quick pace of the tour, students had maybe just a few minutes to look at a work and develop their immediate interpretation.

After discussing the work, or proclaiming their interpretive statement, the students typically copied down the label information in their sketchbook, completed a line on a checklist if applicable, and or made a sketch of the object. Figure 2 depicts one student’s use of the blank sheets in the sketchbook to take notes. Figure 3 depicts a sketch a student made in front of the painting *Silver Sun* by Arthur Dove.

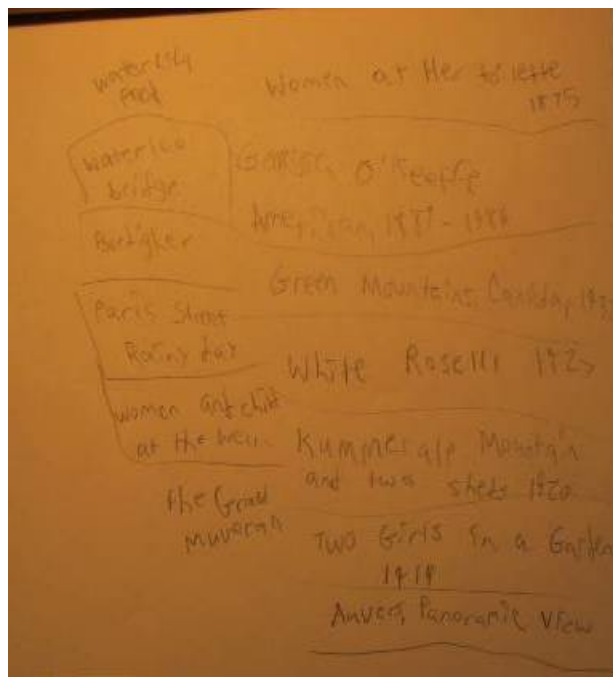


Figure 2. Student notes in sketchbook.



Figure 3. Student sketch of painting by Arthur Dove.

Visual Articulations of Understanding

Students had two opportunities to visually express their interpretations of artworks at the museum, in their sketchbooks and on the reflective prompt they completed upon their return to school from the museum. I will focus on the drawings on the reflective prompt as they are more articulated than those in the sketchbooks, most likely because students had more time to spend on them.

The writing prompt asked students to reflect on their visit to the Art Institute and to identify an artwork that held their attention. I then wanted to capture what kind of emotional and or intellectual response the students had to this artwork. I was trying to break down theories of aesthetic experience that consider focused attention, affective and intellectual reactions as definitional components into a sensible question for elementary aged students (e.g., Beardsley, 1982; Dewey, 1934; Eaton & Moore, 2002). Specifically, this is the prompt students responded to:

During your visit to the Art Institute today, did you see any works of art that you wanted to look at for a long time? If you did, please write about that work of art in the space below and describe how you felt and what you thought about while you were looking at it. You may also include a drawing about your ideas. You may continue writing on the back of the paper.

A total of 42 papers were completed (20 from the sixth grade and 22 from the fifth grade) out of approximately 45 students. All but six students chose to include drawings of artwork from the museum in their response. These remaining six responses discussed specific works of art, but did not include drawings.

The drawings on the writing prompt provide a visual example of students' personal responses and interpretations of some of the works at the museum. The 36 sheets with drawings depict 20 different works of art, indicating that students were interested in a variety of artworks, although the vast majority of these works are from the 19th and 20th centuries. Within this variety, O'Keeffe's *Sky Above Clouds* was drawn most frequently by the sixth grade students (four out of 19), while Still's *Painting* was drawn most often in the fifth grade (four out of 22). This reflects Carl's emphasis on these works of art during the tour.

The formal qualities of the drawings differ between grades. The fifth grade drawings are in color, drawn with pencil and crayons, and are typically more detailed. The sixth grade drawings are all done in graphite pencil and are quick sketches. It may be that the fifth grade students were given more time to complete the prompts, and were encouraged to use crayons. They also had their sketchbooks to use for reference, while I had the sixth grade sketchbooks when the students were completing the prompt. Even with the fifth grade students being able to reference their sketchbook drawings, several students' drawings are more like visual interpretations of the paintings than attempts to faithfully recreate the original composition. I will focus on the drawings that are interpretive, rather than reproductive, as examples of the potential for developing higher order thinking through an explicit attention on visual thinking and qualitative reasoning in developing interpretations of art.

The drawings represent what the students thought was essential to depict about a work in order to make it recognizable, with the drawings thereby serving as a kind of gestalt of the students' conceptions of the work. Through examining this gestalt representation, I was able to infer what the students found interesting or compelling about a work. In some cases, these gestalt images remain reasonably faithful to the original; in other cases the students' drawings are visual

interpretations of the work, providing a visual image of their insight or meaning making with a specific work.

For example, with the O’Keeffe and Still paintings, the students’ drawings basically try to reproduce the essential features of each painting. For the O’Keeffe (see Figure 4), this means repeating rows of somewhat uniformly shaped clouds. Figures 5 and 6 are examples of the drawings from the fifth and sixth grades. The fifth grade drawing is large, in color and includes the oranges and yellows of the horizon in the original. The sixth grade drawing is much smaller, in pencil, and focuses on the repeating rows of clouds without including the horizon. Clearly, the students were struck by the repeating rows of clouds as a representation of what the sky would look like if you were looking down. As one student wrote on the prompt, the painting reminded her of being in a plane flying above the clouds. With the fifth grade students, they also regarded the horizon as an important component of the painting.

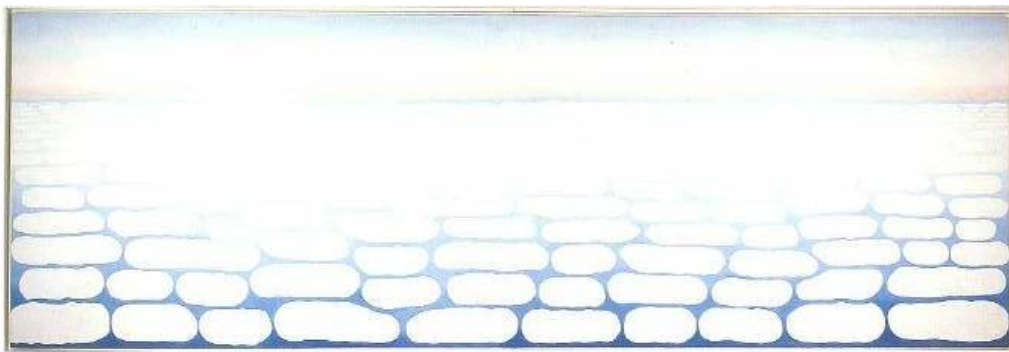


Figure 4. Georgia O’Keeffe, *Sky Above Clouds IV*, oil on canvas, 8’ x 24’.
Image © The Art Institute of Chicago. Not for Reproduction. E19276.

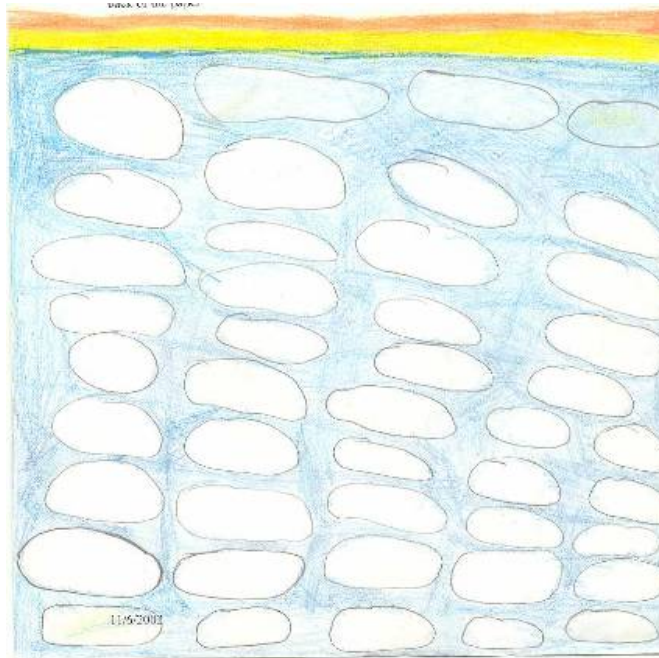


Figure 5. Fifth grade student drawing of O’Keeffe painting.

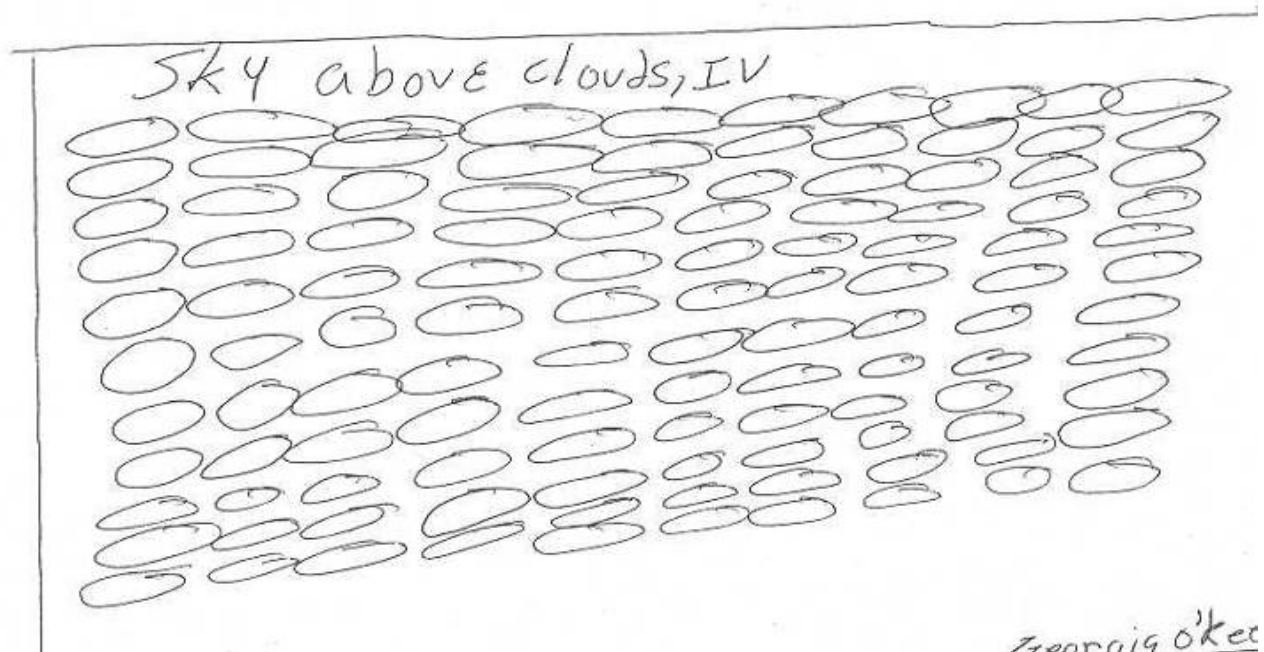


Figure 6. Sixth grade student drawing of O'Keeffe painting.

The drawings (Figure 7) of the Still painting (see Figure 8) are large squares of black, with two of the four drawings including the edge of orange that is in the lower left corner of the original. The students were struck by the blackness of this painting, referring to it in the interview as “the black painting.” During an interview, one student speculated that several students drew this painting because they were lazy (this was his reason why students drew the O'Keeffe also) because it is easy to draw a square of black or rows of clouds, but that a few students didn't remember the corner of orange in the painting even after this student reminded them. This student said he remembered the orange because, “[Mr. Connelly] told me that it was like a sunset that was coming up and it was dark like mountains.” The students also did not remember the very thin vertical white line in the painting, or its textured surface. It seems they were most struck by its blackness, which served as a visual metaphor (Parsons, in press) for their interpretations that were elaborated upon in their writing. For example, one student wrote: “It was covered with black, it had no other colors. It looked like a rainy day in space without stars.” Another wrote, “When I thought of it I was thinking of the dark sky and a little sunset.”



Figure 7. Fifth grade student drawing of Still painting.

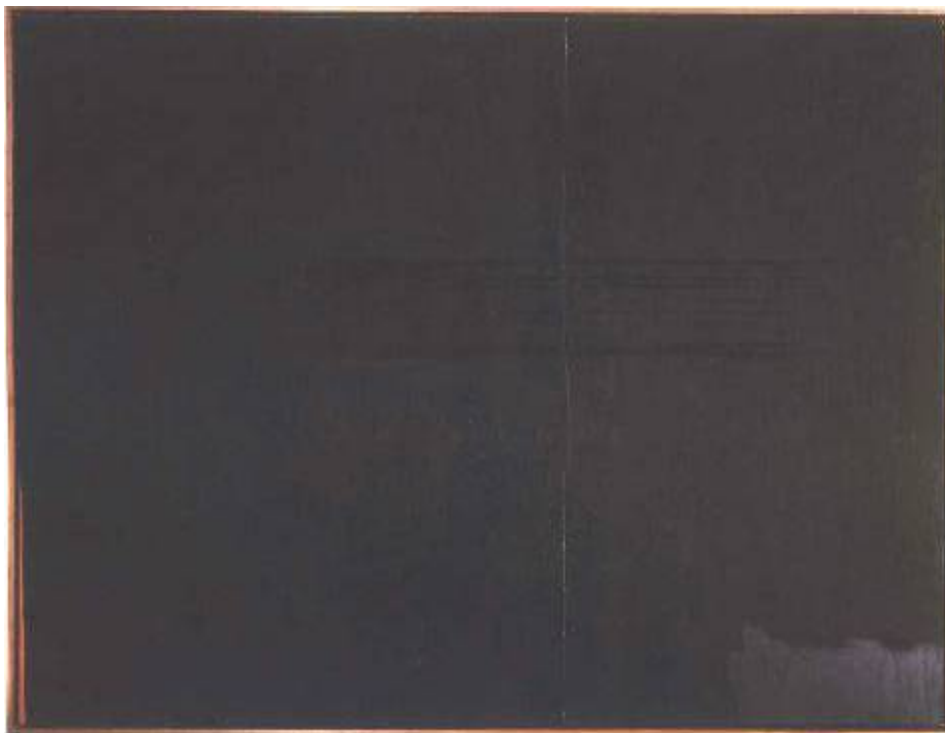


Figure 8. Clyfford Still, 1951-52, oil on canvas, 301.8 x 396.2 cm.
Image © The Art Institute of Chicago. Not for Reproduction. E14509

Several drawings depict the students' more personal reactions to specific paintings. For example, Figure 9 is by a sixth grade student that wrote about *The Weaver* by Diego Rivera because it reminded her of Mexico and how Mexican women weave hammocks. She chose to depict just the female figure weaving, remembering her kneeling position with the cloth stretched out in front of her. The student did not depict the still life of weaving tools in the lower left corner of the original. The figure in the student's drawing seems younger than the woman in Rivera's painting, but she wears braids like Rivera's figure. The student that made this drawing also had long, dark braids, and perhaps she is expressing her personal connection to this image. As Eisner (1994) suggests, the students' emotional connection to the painting informs her visual articulation. Figure 10 is a drawing by another sixth grade student who wanted to enter Monet's painting of water lilies because it was so realistic. In the drawing, she placed herself on the bridge and drew the essential water lily flowers, disregarding the trees that frame Monet's composition.

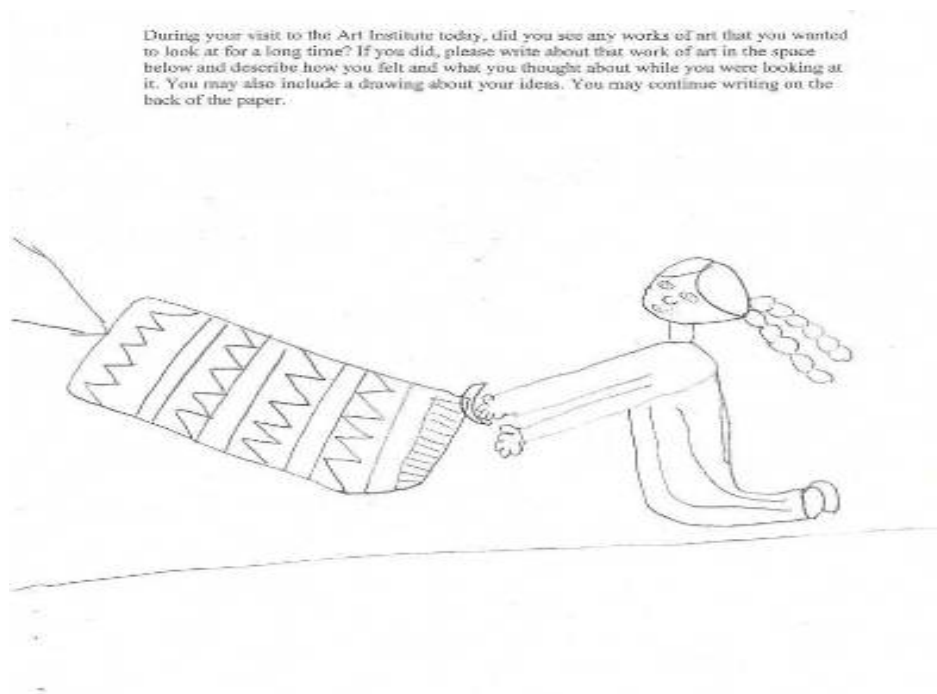


Figure 9. Student drawing of Rivera, *Weaver*.

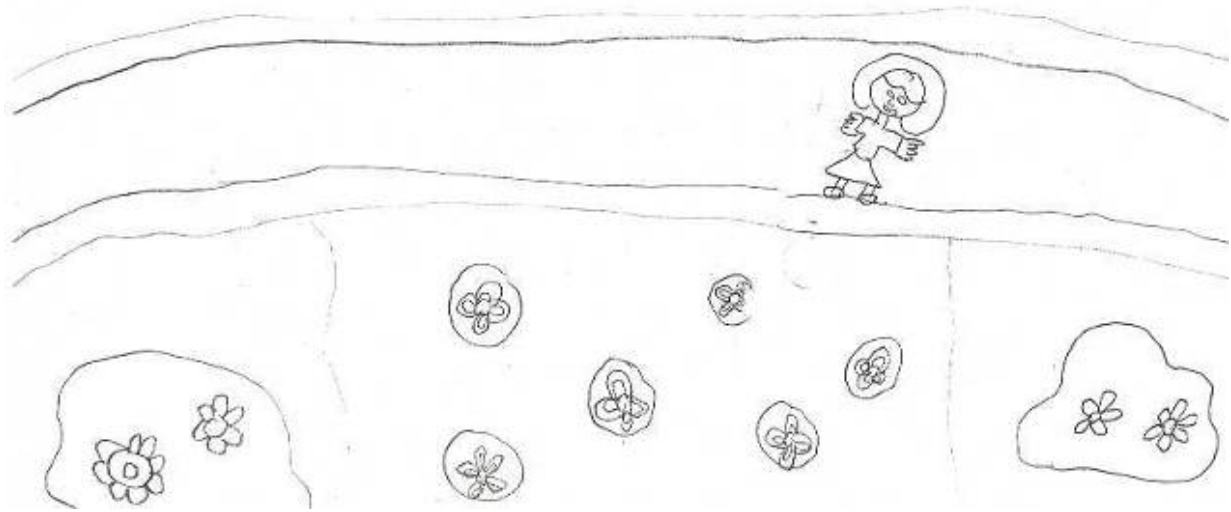


Figure 10. Student drawing of Monet, *Waterlily Pool*.

In a drawing of Cézanne's *Vase of Tulips* (Figure 11), the student remembered that the vase of flowers dominates the vertical composition, the general shape of the vase and its painted green top half. She also remembered that there were fruits on the table next to the vase, although she did not draw the table. In the original composition, there are just three pieces of fruit to the left of the vase, two in the foreground and one in the background. The student has drawn fruit on both sides of the vase, putting the fruit on the left, which looks like apples, in a basket. The student may have remembered Cézanne's painting of a basket of apples that was on display in the same gallery as the *Vase of Tulips*. Also, the original painting has a skewed perspective, with the tabletop receding upwards, so that it seems like the vase and fruit could slide off at any moment. The student did not depict this perspective, but drew the vase and fruit firmly resting on the horizontal plane. This student wrote about how the painting reminded her of home—how her mother puts vases of flowers on the table—and perhaps the addition of fruit and the stable, resting vase increases the homey quality of the painting. This articulation relates, again, to Eisner's (1994, 2002) emphasis on the role of emotion in qualitative reasoning and visual interpretation.

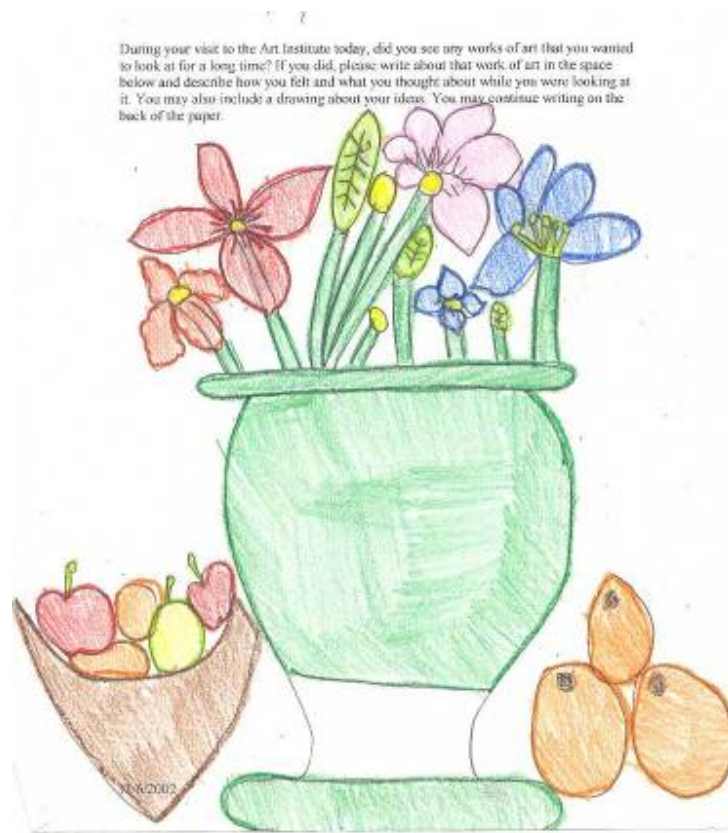


Figure 11. Student drawing of Cézanne, *Vase of Tulips*.

Another student drew and wrote about Monet's painting *Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect*. I remember watching this student at the museum apparently absorbed in studying the Monet painting through sketching. On the prompt, she has drawn the Monet painting again (Figure 12), using all of the blank space available on the front of the page to draw her picture. She drew her composition first in pencil, perhaps copying it from her sketchbook and then used a purple crayon to depict the sky, bridge, and water. The only other color in the composition is the yellow sun (outlined with purple crayon) and a rectangular section of yellow that represents the sun's reflection on the water, part of the "sunlight effect" described in Monet's title. On a separate sheet of paper, Luisa wrote why she was attracted to the painting by Monet:

The work of art I wanted to see a long time was the *Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect* from 1903. This work of art was almost all purple because it was at sunrise. It had a little bit of yellow because of the sunlight. When I saw it it inspired me to draw it right away and leave it for a poster at my bedroom. I liked it because it has my second favorite color, purple. When I saw that picture I thought like if I was there looking at the water below me because it looked so realistic.

Of all the artwork she saw at the museum, this student decided to write about the Monet painting that she was inspired to draw immediately upon seeing it. It seems that the painting made a lasting impression on her, at least for the several hours since leaving the museum. She was attracted to this painting because Monet had used one of her favorite colors, purple, and because she thought it was so “realistic”—she felt as if she could enter the painting and stand on the bridge looking over the water. She then wanted to visually record the painting so that she could live with it in her bedroom. She did this by creating a composition bathed in purple, which is what attracted her to Monet’s painting.



Figure 12. Student drawing of Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect*.

The above examples indicate that students remembered details of certain works of art several hours after seeing them, which implies that these paintings made an impression on the students. The following drawing differs in that the student changed the tone of the painting to reflect her interpretation.

This drawing (Figure 13) is of O’Keeffe’s *Black Cross, New Mexico*. In the original painting (Figure 14), the black cross is slightly off center and parallel with the picture plane, extending from top to bottom and left to right, partially obliterating the evening sky and dominating the undulating hills.

O’Keeffe emphasized the large size and blackness of the cross. She explained the inspiration for this painting in her 1976 autobiography in which she described a cross she saw in

New Mexico, “I was told that it was a Penitent cross...[L]arge enough to crucify a man...the cross stood out—dark against the evening sky ” (cited in Wood, 1996, p. 64). In this quote, O’Keeffe emphasized the darkness of the cross, both physically and figuratively.

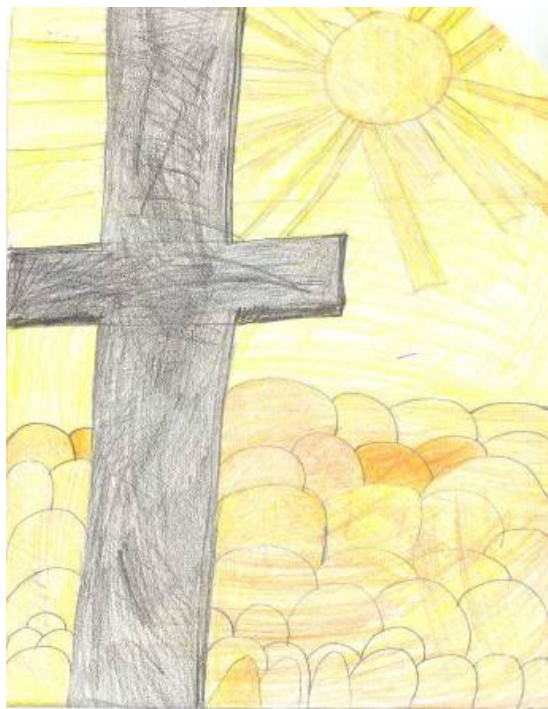


Figure 13. Student drawing of O’Keeffe, *Black Cross, New Mexico*

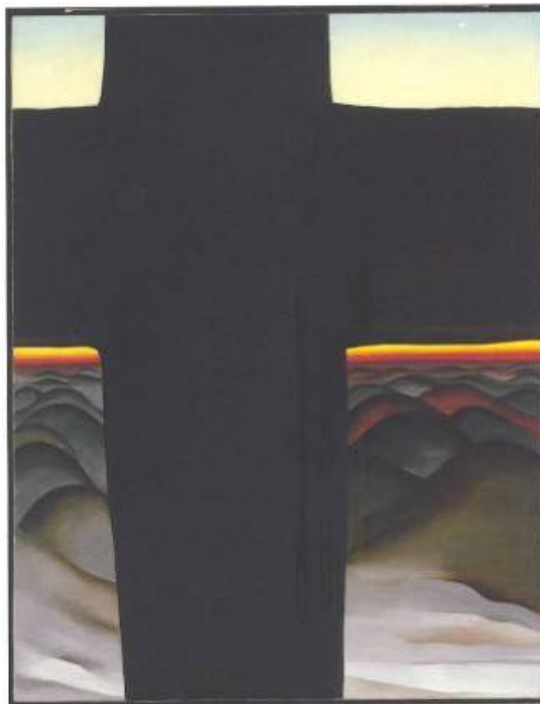


Figure 14. Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Cross, New Mexico*. Oil on canvas, 99.1 x 76.2 cm. Image © The Art Institute of Chicago. Not for Reproduction. E9415.

The student also represented the black cross as slightly off center, parallel with the picture plane, and extending from top to bottom, although not left to right. She also included the rounded hills that extend to the middle ground of the painting. Instead of depicting twilight, she has drawn a large, radiating sun that casts an even orange-yellow light on the hills. While the O’Keeffe cross casts a dark shadow on the hills and masks much of the sky, accentuating the blackness of the cross, the student has minimized the width of the cross and bathed the composition in sunny light. Her written response provides some insight into her interpretation of the painting.

Another painting I liked has a black cross, orange-yellow hills, and a sunset. I felt so different like as if I felt happy but not really happy. It’s something I could not describe. I was thinking that the painter painted the back of a cross where Jesus died for our sins. In the front maybe He is looking unto the earth.

She recognizes that the painting depicts a sunset, but she has chosen to represent a sunny sky more akin to high noon. Perhaps this is because in her interpretation Jesus is on the side of the cross facing the hills, maybe casting his light upon the earth. The painting raises conflicting feelings—“happy but not really happy.” A cross symbolizes death but also resurrection, and perhaps the student is relating to this conflicting symbolism. The dominating darkness of the original painting may have made her feel uneasy, but the glowing light on the horizon and pale light in the sky may be reassuring. It is as if she decided to depict what she thought the resurrection might look like after Jesus died on the big black cross “for our sins”—a landscape bathed in light.

Conclusion

These drawings provide a visual representation of how students perceived certain paintings—what engaged them, what they thought was important about the paintings and how they understood them. In this sense, they provide insight into students’ visual meaning making of works of art. Combined with the written reflections, we learn that students responded frequently to realistic works which some wanted to be immersed in and experience somatically. They employed metaphor to understand abstract works of art, such as Still’s *1951-52*, responded emotionally to certain artworks (such as the O’Keeffe *Black Cross* and Cezanne’s *Vase of Tulips*), and used personal and objective knowledge to further develop their understanding of an artwork. The students’ frequent response to artworks that were given special attention during the tour through dialogue and extended looking, such as O’Keeffe’s *Sky Above Clouds*, the Still, and Picasso’s *Old Guitarist*, indicates that these kinds of opportunities for deeper understanding were important for their aesthetic experiences.

The drawings by these students are manifestations of visual thinking, imaginative cognition, and qualitative reasoning in their use of images (directly observed and from memory) to convey their understanding of artworks—images—that moved them (Arnheim, 1969; Efland, 2004). Affect is a strong component of students’ reasons for choosing to reflect visually on specific images and *how* they articulated those reflections (Eisner, 1994, 2002). Changes to the original compositions were driven by life experiences—visual and emotional memories of home, for example, as in how a vase of flowers can convey comfort. The role of affect in thinking is demonstrated in these drawings. Their interpretations are also shared through their written reflections, which support my understanding and interpretation of their ideas, but necessarily transformed, as Eisner (2002) describes. For example, the student that responded to O’Keeffe’s *Black Cross* made an explicit connection to Jesus Christ and the Resurrection in her written reflection, but used light and color to convey the hope she feels in the Resurrection in her drawing. As metaphor is defined as the mapping of one domain onto another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Parsons, in press), the hills awash in a yellow light serve as a visual metaphor for hope in this student’s drawing. This combination of visual and verbal expression illustrates the kind of imaginative cognition Efland (2004) asserts is essential to art and general education.

While Carl's modernist approach to art education may not reflect current postmodern, social reconstructivist concerns, his emphasis on imagination and student meaning making of works of art through visual and verbal modes of expression provides an example of the implicit attention to the cognitive demands of visual thinking and qualitative reasoning (in addition to linguistic thinking) that frequently occurs in American art classrooms. The interpretive drawings discussed here give some indication of how more explicit instruction focused on developing visual thinking and qualitative reasoning, reflected in a cognitive approach to art education (Eisner, 1994, 2002; Efland, 2002, 2004), would further develop students' higher order thinking skills, which is a critical concern that underlies most contemporary educational aims. The need to facilitate student meaning making—learning—in the art classroom is enhanced by attending to visual and verbal articulations of understanding.

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