

## What is Visual Literacy?

Toledo Museum of Art

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O39niAzuapc>

Brian Kennedy: So, what is visual literacy? Well, art museums can teach a lot about it because art is a language; it's a form of communication. So to be visually literate, you've got to know the alphabet and the vocabulary and the grammar of seeing.

Little children, were told, from the first day they have on the planet up to the age of five, take in more information than at any other time in their lives. They're truly sentient beings, taking in information with all their human senses all the time.

Everything we see is an image. There really isn't a difference between text and image because a text is an image and an image is a text. So we have to learn how to read images through the process of vision.

Now, we know that today we live in a media saturated age — an image saturated age. We're taking in images all the time and we need to broaden what it means to be literate to read images rather than text as image. So it's more than reading and writing, it's reading the visual world.

21st century student studies tell us young people today are consuming images at an extraordinary rate. In the last four years, we're told, young people are actually looking at images throughout the day one hour and 17 minutes more than they used to. So that's actually 7 hours and 38 minutes every day. Extraordinary but how many young children have actually been taught how to read images? How many teachers have done a course in not just the process of vision but how to read images, whether at college or university?

The use of every type of media has increased over the last decade except reading. We need to learn how to read and to read images.

It's considerably a question that is socio-economic. If you're a child from a lower-income family, you've been read to an average about a hundred hours by the age of five. But, if you're from an upper income or middle income family you've been read to over a thousand hours by the age of five so you're ten times more advantaged going to school.

Visual literacy is essential because we need to be able to construct meaning, to make sense of everything that we see.

What does this mean? Why did the Toledo Museum of Art put this strange red thing in front of this building, this very formal classic building with all its straight lines? This curvaceous underbody of this spiky angular creature? Well, we wanted to have fun. We wanted to make

sure that young people would feel it's fun to go into the museum. It's not austere; it's a welcoming place.

Visual literacy has been around for a long time but it's difficult because there are so many different definitions of it and we have to make it understandable so it becomes part of the curriculum. The International Visual Literacy Association started in the late 1960s. They have a journal and they have an annual conference. The first real primer on visual literacy was published in 1973 and there been many books since.

So what does this mean? Looking at this image, you see these young people all dressed in red and white striped outfits. Some of you will know "Where's Waldo" or "Where's Wally," a game where you search for the Wally that's different from all the others.

So what does this mean? Well, if you're a focal point learner if you're somebody who's been trained on "ABC" "123." With focal point perspective you'll probably train your eye to look all around this image. You'll move your eyes all around and you find the Wally or the Waldo that's different. But, if you're somebody who's actually challenged with reading and writing or you grow up in a culture that doesn't emphasize textual learning, you'll probably scan or scope this image. That's how most people were until 500 years ago when we had the printed book revolution.

A visually literate person is, simply put, able to read and write visual language. Visual literacy is a process of sending and receiving images. They make messages. We can construct meaning from them and then we can combine all the different literacies that we have to read our multimedia world.

Visual literacy is the ability to construct meaning from images so it's not actually a skill; it uses skills as a toolbox. It's a form of critical thinking that enhances your intellectual capacity.

It helps you to interpret the content and the meaning of images. To examine their social impact. To think about them from the point of view of, well: what was intended, what was their purpose, who owns them, who are they being sent to, and helping you to visualize the process of visualization and human imagination.

Visual literacy helps you to communicate visually to read and write images. To read and understand them. To make sense of them. To become aware of judgments about them, whether they're accurate are they're valid. What are they worth? What value do they have?

So what does this mean? People from Toledo, Ohio will know this is the Peristyle Theater of the Toledo Museum of Art but it's certainly grand. It's made to impress. It's powerful. It's got lots of seats. It's very grand.

It's a place that inspires awe and imagination in every young person that sees it because we know to read it; is to feel special and to feel inspired.

Today our education system emphasizes textual literacy — those ABCs, one two three's, the digits and letters. And of course, rightly so, also digital communication, the tools of our digital revolution. But we neglect sensory literacy, those human senses as core curriculum.

So textual literacy and computer literacy are the core of the STEM system, as we call it. Some people want to put the A and STEM — the Arts in STEM — the science, technology, engineering, and math but it's much more than that. We need to put the entire human senses into textual and computer literacy. And the dominant sense, the prominent sense, is the visual sense.

Visual literacy is the key sensory literacy. We have to teach it because since we became erect human beings — standing up — we moved away from when we were closer to primates, nearer to the ground and using taste and smell. And now we dominantly use hearing but mainly we use our sight and we need to train ourselves how to see.

There have been only three communications revolutions of grand scale in human history so to be living one is indeed confusing. It's very exciting time to be alive but we're trying to absorb a revolution.

The first communications revolution was 5,000 years ago in the Sumerian Empire when they invented Cuneiform writing. And it took a whole 4,500 years to get to the next great revolution — the printed book revolution, the Gutenberg Revolution as it's called, of the 15th century in Europe. And so we learned our ABCs and our 123s and we moved forward only 500 years, this time to the third great revolution which is the Digital Revolution of our time. All students who graduated in 2013 have had the Internet since the day they were born. It went live on Christmas Day in 1991.

So we need to continue to teach the human senses, to understand that little child before the age of five is the adult that they will become. And the human senses being so important we need to understand vision.

That up to 90% of all the information we take in from the world we take in with our eyes. It becomes that great memory bank of images that informs the way that we see the world.

Now the optic nerve has a million nerve fibers. It has 30% of the entire brain cortex and that's so much more than any other human sense.

But we understand so much more about it now because of brain science. And all that cognitive neuroscience has taught us through the digital revolution.

The key message is that we have to be more visually literate and we need to train people how to see. To do that, first of all, you need to take your time. You need to pay attention.

Museums use lots of techniques to train people how to see. One is a technique like this, Learning to Look. When we look at something, we often make assumptions about it. We've already decided what it is because we've seen it before but if we really look at it, we take our time and we start to see it. When we can really see it, we can begin to describe it very accurately. And after describing it, we can ask analytical questions about it like "what's it made of." And when we've gone through this four stage process we then begin to construct meaning. We begin to make sense of what we see. We begin to become visually literate.

Look at this image. It's an image of a painting by Thomas Cole in the Toledo Museum of Art collection called "The Architect's Dream." You can pause here if you like.

Now imagine what you've seen and place it on this black background. Can you fill in the big picture and all the details? Did you go to the details first and then to the big picture? Pause and try and paint the picture for yourself. Here it is again. What did you see?

Now in terms of learning the grammar of how to look, a good approach is to study the visual Elements of Art. You can use these to look at any image and to think about it in terms of its LINE, those continuous marks with height and width that have no depth. Or its SHAPE – the enclosed area that defines the other elements in a composition such as LINE. Or COLOR which is the full light spectrum and the black and white – all the possible combinations that you can make in terms of hue, which is the name that we give to the colors, or the intensity which is the purity we give to them, or the value of them which is the degree of lightness or darkness that they have. And then we can think about SPACE, those areas around or within objects and the arrangement of them on the surface. Or TEXTURE, the tactile quality of an object. Then you can apply these five Elements back to the Thomas Cole image. Now you're seeing it differently. You can see it through these five different possibilities and some more: form, the time that you see, values different kinds of values.

And then you can think about it in terms of the Principles of Art: emphasis and balance and harmony and variety and movement and proportion and rhythm and unity.

Let's look at the image again. The EMPHASIS, the point or points of focus that you see in the composition. Or the BALANCE, the sense of visual equilibrium. What about HARMONY, the balanced use of similar Elements? Or VARIETY, the use of different or often contrasting Elements that create visual interest? Or MOVEMENT, the way the shapes and the lines and the colors and the forms all direct your eye around the composition, suggesting motion. Or PROPORTION, the relative scale of objects and shapes in an image. Or RHYTHM, the path your eye follows, a regular or repeating arrangement of shapes or colors or whatever. And its sense of UNITY, its overall coherence.

When you learn these Elements and Principles, you walk back out into the world. If you walk outside the Toledo Museum of Art, you go next door and see Frank Gehry's very remarkable Center for the Visual Arts. You start to see it, to see it with the visuals of its lines and its shape

and its color, its space, its texture, and all those principal Elements, whether its harmonious are proportional, whether it's a unified composition.

Or you go back in to the Toledo Museum of Art and you see Jacques-Louis David's "The Oath of the Horatii" and you read these arched areas in the background as a space that encompasses these figures. These dramatic gestures, the triangles, the various volumes - you start to read it much more easily.

Now there are lots of ways we can do this. Some of you may love birding, looking at the differences and the similarities between birds. Some of you may collect postage stamps, play golf, play baseball, do lots of things that cause you to look very, very carefully. Study the differences between roses, the differences between colors. And you learn how to spot the difference.

Publications these days have crosswords and Sudoku but not many have Spot the Difference and it's a great game.

Look at this image. The one on the right is different from the one on the left. But you're already looking at it in terms of the Elements and Principles. Now pause it and look very carefully for the differences. Did you spot them all? It's difficult but the more we train our eyes to see, the easier it becomes.

Some people walking into the Toledo Museum of Art see the Cloister in the Museum and maybe don't notice that those arches – those round shapes in the background – are different from the pointed ones in the foreground. This Cloister with its sides all came from different places. Those of you who know art history would know that the round shaped arches are earlier from the Romanesque Period and the near ones are Gothic, later.

There are lots of different approaches we can have to being visually literate. In art museums, we can study art history. We can analyze works of art over time. We can also use the formal approaches that we've talked about in terms of the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design. But we can also study ICONOLOGY, symbols and what they mean. Or IDEOLOGY, when images give you different aspects of beliefs, values or of ideas. Or SEMIOTICS, one of the great subjects of the 20th century for us, the differences between signs and a signifier and what's signified. Or HERMENEUTICS, which is the literal and intended meaning. And all this will help us to become more visually literate, to become more sensorially aware.

Looking at this image, some of you will see quickly the object in the center and some of you will see the white shaped faces looking at each other. And then you'll say to each other, "I see what you mean."