

Looking at a Piece of Art Three Steps to an Engaging Experience

Step One – The Basics

Begin the process of looking at a piece of art with identifying the following basic elements (usually provided on a nearby nameplate)

The title	This can be a clue to what the artist wants the viewer to see and can be very helpful if the subject matter is unclear
The media of the piece	Understanding the artistic process can provide insight into the artist's ideas
The artist	A name can mean nothing at all or a lot – avoiding bias can be hard, but knowing a gender or cultural background can help with unpacking a piece - additionally, the years of the artist's life can give a clue to the age of the artist when the piece was produced
His/her background	Although not always provided, when combined with the year(s) of the piece's creation, the nationality of an artist can provide an insight into what was happening socially and culturally during the piece's creation
The year(s) of its creation	This provides great historical and artistic context and can be very useful in placing the piece (and its impact).

Step Two – Visual Content

Answer the big question: ***What is it that you are looking at?***

Keep in mind the following:

- Thoroughly examine the visual content of the piece from left to right, top to bottom
- Avoid trying to dig below the surface
- Focus on the very basics in trying to unpack all that is (and isn't) included
- Imagine trying to explain what the piece looks like to someone that can't see it

Step Three – Deeper Levels

Remember, everything in the piece was an artist's choice.

Think about each of the elements and principles of design used by artist and **WHY** they were used. For example:

- What is the point of emphasis and why has the artist chosen to place it where it is?
- What shapes are used in the composition and might they represent a larger idea?
- What colours are used and what might they symbolize?
- What path of movement do your eyes follow when you look at the piece? Does this lead you to discover certain areas of the painting first? Why might the artist have chosen to use this path?

General Tips

- **Take your time** – spend more time *really* experiencing a few pieces rather than trying to see them all
- **Get a good view** – try to experience a 2D piece from the perspective it was created: straight on, eye level to the middle of the picture of the plane. For a 3D piece, examine all possible sides/angles.