

ARTISTIC WAYS OF KNOWING

How to Think Like an Artist

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Dedication

To Willy, Jennifer, and Natalie—My family, my love, my inspiration

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Introduction

The young dancer stands alone with arm extended overhead, looking upward at her fingers, gracefully curved. Seated on the floor nearby, her teacher says, “Now let’s search for your favorite star!”

The dancer stretches her arm skyward, aware of the tips of the fingers reaching higher and higher, body balanced to one side to exaggerate the arm movement. Her chin is raised so her eyes can search far above her hand, far above the ceiling, into the imaginary universe of stars.

“Carefully choose the most delicate star—it is yours!” coaxes her teacher.

She moves gracefully on tip-toe, brushing aside stars first with one arm, then the other. She pauses, slowly closing fingers together to capture her “star.” She gently draws it close to her, eyes intently following each movement. She folds her arms inward, cradling her personal star as she sits at rest before her teacher.

“It’s a perfect choice.” Both smile, sharing the moment.¹

This young dancer’s brief experience encapsulates what it means to think and perceive as an artist. She begins with focused awareness of her body and the space within which she is moving. She pays attention to details in this movement, discriminating how to portray the stretched reach and balance as she searches the imaginary sky. She combines this fine-tuned movement with her emotional intent to discover the most delicate star. As she brushes aside stars and brings her own star into her lap, she expressively internalizes what she wants to create in her unique interpretation of this personal quest. The teacher and student share the dynamic of her performance with an intimate smile as a positive, wordless critique.

This girl’s focused awareness of body and space, of internal sensing/feeling, of interpretive decision-making, and of communication through performance mirrors elements of a prima ballerina’s artistic knowing—but with a difference in degree, refinement, and technical fluency. She experiences the perceptual/cognitive process of learning and interpreting in the arts that defines Artistic Ways of Knowing.

*Dance is not about something;
dance is something.
– Joyce Boorman,
pioneer in children’s dance education.²*

The ability to “know” as an artist is not limited to the dance class, art studio, practice room, or stage. Learning to realize the art in a dance, a painting, a musical score, or a theatrical production requires the ability to think as an artist. This artistic learning process allows students to add depth to understanding, creativity to interpretive decision-

making, and refinement to abstract reasoning. The ability to understand the world with aesthetic sensitivity is fundamental and should be included in every school's curriculum.

Artistic Ways of Knowing: How to Think Like an Artist examines the perceptual and cognitive processes inherent in working in the arts. An understanding of the artistic process can serve as a starting point to devise curricula that can help *every* student learn to think as an artist.

The book begins with perspectives of artistic and aesthetic knowing from artists and scholars across the fields of education and the arts. We examine the role of arts education and aesthetic education in schools, evaluate research claims of arts education's impact on academic achievement, and compare multiple and artistic intelligences. These viewpoints from scholars and experts expound the importance of artistic thinking as a basic component of education.

The book then devotes a chapter to each element of the artistic process, explaining its specific role as part of the Artistic Ways of Knowing. One cannot truly understand the artistic process without the experience of working through an art form; therefore, readers will have this opportunity through small aesthetic entry experiences (shaded in the text), as well as more expansive Sparkler Experiences that highlight the use of each artistic element in a practical lesson format. Sparkler Experiences include extension possibilities that offer challenge, arts integration hints for use in academic areas, and talent spark descriptions of behaviors that may highlight potential talent in the arts area.

Each chapter closes with a set of ideas to ponder and discuss. These are suitable for coursework or professional development. The book also includes an appendix that lists arts resources that can guide teachers into additional avenues to help every student learn to think as an artist.

The Artistic Ways of Knowing are encapsulated on page xi as a reference as you work through the book. Note the recommendations for how to differentiate each element to provide challenges for students who show strength in those areas of artistic reasoning and interpretation.

Let us now return to our opening vignette, from the teacher's perspective. That smile—that shared dynamic of communication through an artistic interpretation—is at the heart of what is vital to learning through the arts. Perhaps you have experienced such an exchange with a student or have seen it in the face of a child after the simplest performance or the most challenging accomplishment. I cherish those moments and remember them fondly as I seek to unveil artists in every classroom as they experience Artistic Ways of Knowing.

¹ Haroutounian, 1994

² Boorman, in Booth & Hachiya, 2004, p. 85

Artistic Ways of Knowing

Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination



To perceive and differentiate through the senses
with acute awareness

*Differentiate to a higher level of complexity in the
perception of sounds, images, motions, and concentration*

Metaperception

To manipulate perceptions and emotions internally while making interpretive decisions

*Differentiate through tasks that require more subtle, abstract
decision making, with multiple choices for interpretation*



Creative Interpretation

To rework and refine interpretive decisions using the elements
of perceptual discrimination and metaperception

*Differentiate by expanding exploratory experiences,
encouraging the reworking and refinement of interpretive ideas*



Dynamic of Behavior and Performance/Product

To communicate a creative interpretation aesthetically through reaction
to an art performance (music, dance, theater) or an artistic product (the visual arts)

*Differentiate through student-guided rehearsals toward a performance, repeated
performances, or the reworking of an artwork or a written product for further refinement*

Critiquing

To evaluate oneself and others with artistic discrimination

*Differentiate by fine-tuning discrimination through vocabulary,
level of artistic work critiqued, and detailed communication of perceptions*



Developed by Joanne Haroutounian, 1995



Figure 1.1. Vincent Van Gogh, *Green Wheat Fields, Auvers*, 1890, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



Figure 1.2. Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol – Madame Monet and Her Son*, 1875, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



CHAPTER ONE

Perspectives of the Arts

The Impressionist paintings at the National Gallery of Art have visitors this afternoon. One art student is intently focusing back and forth from Van Gogh's *Green Wheat Fields, Auvers* on the wall to her half-completed canvas as she experiments with different brushes, blends paints into thick mixtures, and occasionally pauses at length in focused reflection as she ponders her next strokes.

Enter a rambunctious group of elementary students, corralled by a museum docent and a teacher. As the docent points out details in the Van Gogh and explains the Impressionist style, there is a combination of pushing, shoving, and half-attention. However, there are a few students who edge their way forward to examine the brushstrokes and texture up close. They linger, taking in the painting as the group ambles to the next room, then catch up with the others, purposely walking slowly backwards to see how the painting's texture and colors change as they distance themselves.

Two teenagers sit on the floor in front of Monet's *Woman with a Parasol*, eyeing the painting carefully, pausing, then writing in their notebooks. They work for a while in silence, connecting with the artwork, one writing a poem while the other develops a dramatic character sketch.

This scene depicts aesthetic experiences between visitors to the museum and the masterpieces before them. The artist is actively engaged with the painting on the wall before her, personally interpreting her aesthetic connection to it through her developing artwork. The children are exposed to the masters, extending their arts experiences beyond the school. Those few who are drawn to a painting's details are realizing an aesthetic dynamic. The teenagers who are transforming their reactions into words and dramatic intentions understand how creative interpretation can add breadth to their work.

*A crowd of visitors steered through
a picture-gallery by a guide, with attention
called here and there to some high point, does not perceive;
only by accident is there even an interest in seeing a picture for
sake of subject matter vividly realized. For to perceive,
a beholder must create his own experience.
- John Dewey, philosopher¹*

Arts Education and Aesthetic Education

The role of the arts in education has been tossed back and forth over decades as educational trends come and go. Discussions of the merits of arts/aesthetic education are familiar to those working in the arts, with differing perspectives on how to implement aesthetic learning in schools. There is an age-old dilemma of having to defend the arts by using them as a vehicle to improve academic domains.

If we looked at American public education 20 years ago, we would find music and visual arts training in most elementary schools, taught by specialists once or even twice a week. Middle schools or junior high schools typically offered performance and studio classes, expanding to dramatic offerings with dance options here and there. Secondary options might have included music and art appreciation classes, with possible humanities classes that merged history, culture, and the arts. This reflected a rich, healthy arts presence in schools.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and only 27 states have considered the arts as a core academic subject to include in curriculum. The majority of these states refer to the arts in general terms rather than delineating specific arts domains (visual arts, music, dance/movement, theater/drama). *A Snapshot of State Policies for Arts Education* notes that “defining the arts as a ‘core’ or ‘academic’ subject in state policy...puts the arts on equal footing with other core subjects considered essential to ensuring all students receive a well-rounded education.”² Although almost every state has policies that relate to arts instruction, they vary widely by discipline and grade level, content, frequency and duration, and qualification for delivery of instruction.

*The function of the arts is to bring order out of chaos,
coherence out of the endless state,
the gibberish of the stars,
and to render people capable of thinking metaphorically.
The arts are an essential part of public education,
and without their special lucidity,
the college graduate is only half a conscious soul.
- Edward Albee, playwright³*

There is wide disparity in how the arts are implemented in the curriculum in different states; however, the establishment of the voluntary National Standards for Arts Education in 1994 provided guidance through curriculum standards that are used in all 50 states, with revisions to align with current educational national policy and state-specific requirements.⁴ The National Core Arts Standards publication, released in mid-2014 for state review, reflects the current Common Core standards for academic subjects.⁵ If we pair these two sets of standards as a way of establishing a structure for curriculum and then recognize the arts as basic to that curriculum, we may head to the upward end in our see-saw balance of the presence of the arts in schools in the next decade.

So how should the arts be taught in our schools? Here is where arts educators offer their perspectives, with the traditional approach of studio or performance training on one side,

and an aesthetic approach on the other that incorporates a broader understanding and that may reach beyond the art-specific domain. The literature seeks room for both in order to provide general arts education as well as challenging options for budding artists in schools.

*I want to reclaim the role of studio practice
for the heart of art education and, perhaps,
for the future of art in our culture,
not so much because art education should be
about training all children to become artists,
but because some very fundamental learning
is acquired through acts of artistry.
- Judith Burton, art scholar⁶*

Judith Burton contends that if “artistic growth is a normative feature of general development, and that central to all development is the need to shape and communicate meaning, then studio practice assumes added significance.”⁷ She describes two ways of teaching the arts, with the focus on the studio approach. The first is “art with a capital A,” meaning conventional techniques that “have children behave ‘as artists’ in order to be initiated into the vernacular of artistry.” She then describes “art with a small a” as an approach that emphasizes learning in an “appropriate developmental context.”⁸ As children grow, they acquire “new and more complex understandings of qualities and properties of materials” that they use to create their art. This developmental continuity is a way for children to link their image-making to a quest for meaning, similar to language development.

Arts educators realize the developmental growth of artistic understanding as students gain skill in their respective arts. Jerome Bruner describes this development as a spiral curriculum in which basic ideas are used in a progression so that “one’s understanding of them comes from learning to use them in progressively more complex forms.”⁹ In the visual arts, the freely scribbled drawings of young children evolve into artworks that have a sense of form, detail, and color. In music, children’s initial sense of rhythmic pulse and melodic line grows into more complex musical forms using dynamics for self-expression. In dance, children begin to pay attention to their intuitive movement, realizing how they can use their bodies intricately to express themselves as they move through space. In drama, the play and pretend that is part of childhood expands in complexity as children gain perceptive and metaperceptive depth. Artistry is evident at all stages because students are communicating through their artwork. No words are necessary—we need only to absorb their artwork to understand what they have to say.

*If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words,
the arts of painting and music would not exist.
- John Dewey, philosopher¹⁰*



CHAPTER TWO

Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

I find myself on a people-mover in a major airport between terminals, taking in the sights and sounds that surround me. Fellow travelers are intently eyeing their cell phones or are focused straight ahead toward their destination. I am gathering in the colors and sounds of the artwork overhead—a set of colored circles that seem to light up and go off randomly with accompanying simple melodic tones. As I look more closely, I realize that the lights are not random but occur when someone is on the people-mover directly below them. How inventive and fascinating! As I step off, I linger to enjoy this mesh of sounds, lights, and artistic interaction a few more minutes. I seem to be alone in savoring the experience. Just before leaving, I smile as I spy a young boy stepping onto the people-mover holding his mother’s hand, eyes riveted to the lights above.

Artistic knowing begins with fine-tuned sensory awareness. The artist pays attention to what surrounds him or her and enjoys delineating intriguing details. The value of bringing this type of focused awareness to our students is exemplified in the vignette above. The child is about to experience the art piece, his curiosity sparked by his senses. He pays attention to the lights and sounds amidst the adult disinterest around him. He is perceptually aware of the artistic experience.

In a world filled with bombarding stimuli, one is almost forced to tune out rather than tune in to the sounds and sights that grab our attention. Television streams words across the bottom of the screen while news reporters pepper details of the day’s events, with multiple screens vying for our attention. Children and adults alike grab at different mobile device apps to try their hands at quick-moving games. In this fast-moving world, taking time to pay close attention to details through the arts provides a way of nurturing the focus and depth of awareness that may be missing from a child’s everyday environment.

We learned in Chapter One that Elliot Eisner, a preeminent arts scholar, describes perceptual awareness and discrimination as “qualitative awareness,” with its highest point noted as “connoisseurship.”

There is quite a difference between listening and hearing, between touching and feeling. What we should want to do over the course of our lifetime is to increasingly refine each of these abilities to whatever degree we and our culture can make possible. We need to develop critical abilities to differ the many qualities that constitute our world.¹

Eisner describes examples of connoisseurship as a mother who can read the tone of her child’s voice, and a teacher who can recognize the difference in the sound of productive work versus that of confusion in a classroom. One vivid example is that of a tailor who can pick up a piece of cloth and tell by running his hands over the fabric that the feel of the

cloth is 86% silk, 1% wool, and a balance of cotton or rayon fiber.² Perceptual awareness and discrimination lie at the heart of the initial stage of learning in every arts discipline.

Visual Arts

Visual artists perceive the world with acuity, aware of dimensions of space, color, and texture that go unnoticed by most others. As youngsters, they may be the scribblers who add artwork to the margins of math papers as their minds seek creative balance to the convergent tasks asked of them. Or they may be the students who seem to be daydreaming in class as they focus their attention on details in a painting on the wall of the classroom.

I often begin my workshops on Artistic Ways of Knowing by greeting participants at the door and then traveling around the room chatting with them before the formal opening of the session. In the first few minutes of the session, I weave close to the audience as I talk. When I get to the topic of perceptual awareness and discrimination, I stop and put my hands over my earrings and ask if anyone can describe them. I usually wear gold earrings that have a tiny piano, cello, and eighth notes dangling along with a few silver stars. They are intricate and need focus to capture all the details. In my first request, there may be one or two individuals who mention gold earrings, but that is usually all. I then remove my hands from my ears and continue walking slowly to allow the participants to focus on the details. It takes a few tries for them to realize that the cello has an endpin, which differentiates it from other string instruments. After several minutes of focused attention, they have experienced visual perceptual awareness. This is an easy, immediate way to demonstrate what visual focus is all about, and it can be done in a matter of minutes in any classroom.

*Seeing
is an
achievement,
not merely a
task.
- Gilbert Ryle,
art scholar³*

In *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art*, Perkins explains that “looking at art invites, rewards, and encourages a thoughtful disposition, because works of art demand thoughtful attention to discover what they have to show and say.”⁴ A student pondering a painting on the classroom wall may be connecting to the details of line, color, balance, or mood. Perkins cautions against the “look and see” mindset of arts encounters, instead encouraging individuals to take time to savor and analyze details with an intelligent eye. What do you see when looking at an artwork in the first minute? Now add two minutes more, then four minutes, gathering depth and breadth in the perceptive experience.

Several months ago I found myself at the Chicago Institute of Art standing in the room that is dedicated to George Seurat’s painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande*

Jatte. I was alone in the room, the painting enticing me with every detail and subtle coloration. Where to begin with this mammoth canvas—it is nearly seven feet high and ten feet wide—with its tiny details of pointillistic texture? I thought of Ryle’s quote (previous page) as I spent a full half-hour absorbing the magnificent details of the painting.

Each extra minute of studying a work of art brings concentrated focus to the basic elements of the artwork. How are colors used—blended or blocked, bold or muted? Are lines straight, curved, horizontal, or vertical? How does the artist make use of texture? How is the overall space used—shapes, dimensions, and depth?

The Sparkler Experience on the following page pushes students to take the time to truly *see* the details in a work of art and brings perceptual awareness and discrimination to the forefront of the task.



Figure 2.2. George Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte*, 1884, Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 2.3. George Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte* (detail of the butterfly near the girl in white), 1884, Art Institute of Chicago



Visual Arts

Sparkler Experience



Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

What Do You See? Students examine details in the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* by George Seurat for focused visual perception of details.⁵

Preparation: Project the artwork onto a projection screen or a blank wall, or use a large computer screen, keeping clarity of color but providing a larger image than the one that is in this book.

1. Students look carefully at the overall picture and jot down descriptive words about it, taking two full minutes for this initial viewing. They then share and compare their observations. Vivid descriptive words should be written on the board to nurture critiquing and analytic vocabulary.
2. Then ask the students to look for details in the people in the painting—faces, clothing, possible connections, relationships by placement. Provide at least three minutes for these discoveries. Have students share ideas for a possible storyline that can describe what is happening in the picture.
3. Next, have students note the use of color and the perspective of distance in the painting—light, shadow, and textural blending of different colors—for another three minutes. Discuss how Seurat created the artistic technique of *pointillism*—dots of pure color on the canvas that, from a distance, create a haze of light and color. Can they see evidence of this in any part of the reproduction of the painting, even though they cannot see the true texture of the paint on canvas?
4. Students should choose a single figure from the painting to examine carefully in order to create their own picture, using textural effects to mimic pointillism.

EXTEND: Using their drawing as a basis, students can create a character sketch (telling who the person is, why he or she is in the park, etc.) or a monologue that the person might say if we could hear him or her. Students may also choose to create a poem about the person.

ARTS INTEGRATION: Students can view the first act of *A Sunday in the Park with George* by Stephen Sondheim to see how the painting was used as the basis of the musical's storyline. Note how the painting comes together at the close of this act. For further connections, examine Seurat's life in Paris in the late 1800s and the Impressionist movement.

TALENT SPARK: Note students who discover minute details in their observations and can transfer those details to their own drawings. Also take notice of those who make creative connections with the painting's details.