Chapter Two: Developing Visual Literacy

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- Words and Images
- Describing the World
- Representational, Abstract, and Nonrepresentational Art
- Form and Content
- Conventions and Art
- Iconography

Works in Progress
Lorna Simpson’s *The Park*

The Critical Process
Thinking About Visual Literacy: John Taylor’s and Howling Wolf’s, *Treaty Signing at Medicine Lodge Creek*

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This Chapter Will:
- introduce the student to the interrelationship between words, images and objects in the world
- examine Lorna Simpson’s artwork
- illustrate ideas of representation in different types of art
- make the distinction between form and content in art
- introduce iconography to further students’ visual literacy
- examine cultural conventions of beauty and reality
- learn additional terminology used to describe the characteristics of works of art

KEY TERMS

calligraphy | content | illusionistic
form | representational | subjective
creativity | abstract | 
subject matter | nonrepresentational |
nonobjective | mudra | 
composition | iconography | 
naturalistic | 
optic |
LECTURE AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Words and Images
Discuss the differences between words and images using Rene Magritte’s *The Treason of Images* (fig. 16). Point out that visual literacy is only attainable if an understanding of language itself is understood. Many times words and our verbal descriptions of objects do not coincide. Illustrate this idea with another Rene Magritte work titled *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1930, which presents the viewer with many isolated objects with words under each one. For example, in one section, under an image of a shoe, the word la Lune (French for the moon) is written. Magritte is clearly challenging the viewer to question his or her visual literacy, thus posing the paradoxical nature of seeing itself: that sometimes what we see is not always what we see. Ask students to consider the notion that Western culture is visually dependant on mass media such as magazines, television and the Internet, yet we remain visually illiterate. Examine Lorna Simpson’s *Necklines* (fig. 18) and Duane Michal’s *This Photograph is My Proof* (fig. 21) to explore the way images and words function together to create meaning. Show examples from other artists such as John Baldessari, Gilbert and George, or Barbara Kruger, that incorporate words and images to further develop students’ visual literacy.

Counterpoint the examples from the Western world with those from the Nonwestern world. With examples of Islamic art and architecture, such as *Triumphal Entry* (fig. 17) or *The Dome of the Rock* in Jerusalem, emphasize the importance of words over images in the Muslim world. Provide students with a brief overview of the Islamic religion and the symbolic significance of calligraphy as their primary form of art.

2. Types of Art Representational Art
Show examples of a wide variety of representational art including illusionistic, figurative, and naturalistic. Emphasize the similarities in all the types of representational art: recognizable imagery. Representational art depicts the appearance of things. Objects in the everyday world are re-presented for the viewer. Distinguish between Naturalism and Realism as referring to specific types of representational art which conforms very closely to the appearance of objects, and Illusionism (or trompe l’oeil [fool-the-eye]) works of art are sometimes indistinguishable from those objects in everyday world.

3. Abstract Art
Define abstract art by defining the word abstract. As a verb, abstract means “to take from,” to extract the essence of a thing or idea. As a noun, the word abstract refers to a summary of a longer text. Provide the following analogy for students; when an unknown writer, for example, submits their 1,500-page novel to a publisher for possible publication, the publisher usually wants to see an abstract, or a summary of the work that emphasizes the main ideas of the book. Relate these two definitions to examples from the text. Point out that some artists, such as Marisol Escobar, simplify/abstract the features of her *Baby Girl* (fig. 23) and exaggerate size in order to emphasize the emotional presence of this rather monstrous baby. Many artists interested in abstraction are not conforming closely to the appearance of the objects in the world but are emphasizing or revealing certain qualities not otherwise apparent to the viewer.
4. Nonrepresentational Art
Illustrate nonrepresentational or nonobjective art by similarly dissecting the words themselves. A nonrepresentational artwork has no representation to the world of images. There is no object that is readily familiar, but the aim of the artist is to represent an idea that transcends the real world. Using Malevich’s *Suprematist Painting, Black Rectangle, Blue Triangle* (fig. 26), explain how nonrepresentational imagery such as Malevich’s colored geometry can evoke ideas and emotions.

5. Form and Content
Form is what we see; content is the interpretation of what we see. In relation to art works, the two terms are inseparable since form determines content. Using examples in the chapter illustrate that in a nonobjective work of art, like Malevich’s *Suprematist Painting, Black Rectangle, Blue Triangle* (fig. 26), form is the content. Other artists, such as Piet Mondrian have similarly arrived at a nonobjective type of art that considers formal elements of shape, color, and spatial properties of the composition as the primary content. To illustrate that Malevich and Mondrian did not begin their artistic career painting nonobjective artworks, show early representational works by both artists and continue with their experiments in abstraction to arrive at their more familiar “mature” style.

A comparison of works with the same subject matter can illustrate form, content and how form determines content; as form changes, so does content. A good example of this is Auguste Rodin’s and Constantine Brancusi’s *The Kiss*. Where Rodin’s sculpture represents a more realistic kiss, Brancusi’s is abstract. Consequently, the more naturalistic/figurative, representational kiss evokes a more passionate emotional content whereas Brancusi’s geometric, simplified form renders a more informal or impersonal, childlike idea of a kiss.

6. Conventional Art
Remind students that the question of “What is Art” depends on their own experiences, their prejudices, beliefs, and values. Ask students to consider the definition of beauty. Discuss how beauty is culturally determined. See www.cichon.de/ideal-beauty/ to read and view G. W. Cichon-Hollander’s “A Short Introduction to The Ideal Beauty of the Human Body in Art,” which illustrates ideas of female beauty using masterpieces of art, from Venus of Willendorf to examples in the early 20th century. Remind students that if they only like art that is beautiful, they are limiting themselves to one particular type of expression. Emphasize the power of “ugly” imagery that is sometimes necessary to provoke deeper contemplation. Illustrate this idea with Ivan Albright’s heavily-textured and unflattering portrait paintings and prints such as *Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida*.

Using Kenneth Clark’s comparison of a Western and Nonwestern artwork, discuss the term ethnocentrism. Ask students to consider their own prejudices concerning the conventions of other cultures. The decoration and modification of the body through various means such as cosmetics, tattooing, piercing, scarification, circumcision, head
binding, and so on dates back many thousands of years. Scarification and filing of the teeth are considered by many tribal peoples as a way of differentiating the human body from nature and the natural body of animals. The resulting “non-natural” body is beautiful. Animals do not file their teeth or tattoo their skin. People all over the world in virtually every society decorate themselves and so there is no reason to think that our ancestors did not. In Western industrialized culture, we tend to dismiss modification of the body as something “primitive,” however, the Western body beautiful is achieved through similar types of alterations such as orthodontics, plastic surgery, and the application of make-up.

7. Iconography
Discuss how artists use images to symbolize an idea. Ask students to think about an image of a heart and its interpretation. To understand iconography is to be familiar with the theory of Semiotics—the study of signs and symbols of all kinds, what they mean, and how they relate to things or ideas they refer to. Ask students how images and words function within our society. Elaborate on the theory of semiotics as it relates to the issue of visual literacy. Show examples of Western signs and symbols in order to achieve a proper perspective on how images and words function in our society.

CRITICAL THINKING: More Opportunities to Think About Art
Several artworks are detailed in the Critical Thinking and Works in Progress features found in this chapter. In addition, diverse opportunities for studying these works are located on the Companion Website and Companion CD-ROM.

1. Works in Progress: Lorna Simpson’s The Park
Lorna Simpson’s Necklines (fig. 18), and The Park (fig. 19) explores the way images and words function together to make meaning. Compare Simpson's use of words and imagery with that of Duane Michal's in This Photograph is My Proof (fig. 21). Ask students the following questions: Does the accompanying text transform each image? What is the intention of each artist? How do the artists want viewers to respond to their work? Would they have responded the same way if the text were not part of the artwork?

Direct students to the “Visual Demonstrations” doorway in A World of Art companion CD-ROM to facilitate an understanding of the photo-silkscreen technique used by Simpson in The Park series.

For more Lorna Simpson information and a related student project go to the following websites: www.albrightknox.org/ArtStart/Simpson.htm or www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/simpson_lorna.html

2. Thinking About Visual Literacy
Promote visual literacy by having students compare and contrast the artworks of John Taylor and Howling Wolf, Treaty Signing at Medicine Lodge Creek (figs. 37 and 38). Review the differences between representational and abstract art, and point out that realistic works of art are often not as true to reality as abstract works of art. Engage
students in a discussion about the relationship of form to content realizing that as form changes, the content also changes. Have students evaluate the aims of the two artists by what, and how, they have represented the historical event.

For more Native American Indian Ledger Art examples and history visit the website at the Plains Indian Ledger Art Digital Publishing Project at: http://weber.ucsd.edu/Depts/Ethnic/fac/rfrank/Ledger.Project.Web/Ledger.Home.html

Initiate a discussion about public images that students find discriminatory or offensive in terms of stereotyping a culture or group. How would they re-interpret these images or use alternative symbols to challenge existing images. For more works relating to the deconstruction of stereotypical imagery, see works by Masami Teraoka, Geisha and AIDS Nightmare; Kerry James Marshall, Better Homes, Better Gardens; Robert Colescott, George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware; and Kara Walker, The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
Direct students to their Student Study Guide when assigning Writing Assignments as the following assignments are written as instruction for the student and are contained in the guide as they are here.

1.Behold Beauty.
Have students visit the site http://www.beautyworlds.com/. The focus of this site is the understanding and appreciation of beauty in the natural world, in Western culture, and in other cultures both past and present. Topics covered include fashion, hairstyles, beautiful animals, and range from Aztecs to Orchids. Have students compose a list of criterion regarding beauty (i.e. what determines a beautiful person, landscape, artwork, etc.).

2. High-Fives and Hang Tens
Ask students to research and compile a dictionary of at least 20 iconographic gestures, religious and/ or secular (i.e. Buddhist mudras, peace sign, Star Trek greeting, etc). Have students compare their dictionary of signs and symbols with others in the class.

3. American History Lesson
Have students research the subject matter illustrated in John Taylor and Howling Wolfe’s Treaty Signing at Medicine Lodge Creek, 1875-1878. Are there other artworks that illustrate this event in American history? Compare and contrast with the images in the text.
HANDS-ON PROJECTS
Direct students to their Student Study Guide when assigning Hands-On Projects as the following assignments are written as instruction for the student and are contained in the guide as they are here. For additional project ideas, remember to investigate the Hands-On Projects found on the Companion Website.

1. A World of Art Companion Website Featured Project: The Process of Abstraction
For this project, students will change an original photograph from a representational image to a nonobjective image in several steps. See A World of Art Companion Website for detailed instructions and illustrations.

2. Emotional Icons
Assign students various words associated with emotions such as optimism, depression, anxiety, anger, then have students create a nonrepresentational image or logo for their assigned word reflecting the essence of that emotion.

3. Personalized Portrait
Have students use portraits of themselves to create a work of art in the style of Lorna Simpson.

4. Historical Stained Glass
Have students create a stained glass panel (using colored paper) that illustrates a particular event in their personal history.

RESOURCES

A World of Art Companion CD-ROM:

Photo Silkscreen Technique
Have students enter the Visual Demonstrations doorway in A World of Art companion CD-ROM to better understand the photo-silkscreen technique used by Lorna Simpson in her Park series.

A World of Art Companion Website:
Remember to direct students to A World of Art companion website (www.prenhall.com/sayre) to help further their understanding of the materials discussed in this chapter with ideas for completing hands-on projects and exercises. Self-testing materials are also available and offer students the opportunity to evaluate their understanding of the chapter materials in a variety of formats. In addition, links to websites featuring contemporary artists, and museum and gallery exhibitions related to this chapter will enhance discussion and comprehension. Links for this chapter include:

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS: Sokari Douglas Camp is an African artist who combines a western aesthetic—including influences from artists such as Anthony
Caro or Richard Serra, with imagery of her own culture. Her work is especially poignant in relation to the discussion on Conventions and Art (pages 28-29). Her desire to "redress this balance that has led the Kalabari born artist to return to her roots and make works about Masquerade, particularly the Kalabari festivals in celebration of water spirits and the Yoruba Gélédé Masquerade, which explores the spiritual and social roles of women in Yoruba culture."

**GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS: The National Museum of African Art** holds a collection of African art that is both extensive and inspirational, and for those accustomed to a western notion of aesthetics—challenging. Pablo Picasso was greatly influenced by the African masks he saw on a visit to the Trocadero. These works had a power and an "exoticism" that he had not felt in "western" art—they were inspirational.

**Other Suggested Websites**

**Lorna Simpson** information and a related student project can be viewed at sites: www.albrightknox.org/ArtStart/Simpson.htm or www.artencyclopedia.com/artists/simpson_lorna.html


**Aesthetics, Beauty** and all the cultural ramifications of what is beautiful and the ideal human body in art is historically chronicled at: http://www.beautyworlds.com/ or http://www.cichon.de/ideal-beauty/

**Jan van Eyck** artworks and information is available at Chris Witcombe’s Art History Resources on the Web at: http://witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHLinks2.html

**Suggested Videos:**

*Videos and other resources are available for purchase through any of the distributors listed in the Resources section of this manual.*

Works in Progress: Lorna Simpson
Rene Magritte, 2000
Painting the Town: The Illusionistic Murals of Richard Haas,1989
The Painter’s World: Abstraction
Creating Nonobjective Paintings