Developing Creative Approaches in Picture Presentation

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Abstract

In this presentation, I shall discuss how principles of creativity can be applied to picture analysis and interpretation to develop new and more effective procedures for understanding pictures.

In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to critically analyze the essential qualities involved in picture interpretation and to apply creativity methods to the various aspects of the process. We should use the principles of creativity to:

- Glean potentially useful and applicable ideas from different disciplines and then apply these ideas to picture interpretation.
- Utilize both our conscious and unconscious mind to help us to understand pictures.
- Generate a variety of associations by a variety of methods—and evaluate them as possibilities — rather than accepting the first ones that might come to mind.

Should we apply the principles of creativity to art interpretation - and if so - how? We already have a variety of methods that we can use for interpreting art; and yet, new and innovative ways of looking at pictures are being developed and introduced all the time.

Feldman describes a very unique approach to understanding art which he calls Midrashic Explanation. Rooted in the tradition of finding meaning in ancient sacred scriptures, this approach applies the principles of Midrash to the problems of understanding art. It involves Addition or Interpolation, Subtraction or Omission, Symbolic Inquiry, Analogy, Allegory, Prophecy, and Commentary.

Another approach to viewing art is described by Feinstein. This method involves "the clustering" of associations that have been derived from the various aspects of a work of art so that we might create a metaphoric interpretation.

If good traditional methods for interpreting art already exist, then why develop new ones? The answer is simply that new and innovative ways of looking at art can enable us to see a work of art from different perspectives and perhaps with better understanding.

Each traditional method of art interpretation, such as: Formalism, Iconography, or Psychoanalytic, has inherent strengths and weaknesses. Formalism embraces the doctrine that the meaning and emotion of an artwork depend wholly on the organization of its various elements of design. Iconography is concerned with the social-historical basis of a painting and the meaning of its symbols but it tends to ignore the elements of design and the psychological aspects of a picture.

Psychoanalytical analysis is even more limited in scope. It's only purpose it to help us to understand how psychological factors and influences in the life of the artist have affected his or her work. It neglects all of the other elements in a picture that help to shape our understanding of it.

No single approach to art interpretation can provide us with more than a limited perspective of a work of art - and yet we need to see a painting or a photograph from a variety of perspectives in order to understand it reasonably well. If, however, we use a variety of different approaches when we look at a work of art, we will be able to see the work from more than one perspective. And, as a result, our viewing experience will be much more interesting and rewarding.

To accomplish this, we will need to apply the principles of creativity to art interpretation and to allow those principles to guide our thinking. We will also need to answer such questions as: Where do the boundaries lie? Can the rules be changed?

- How can we separate the various parts of the art interpretation process in order to apply these principles?
- How do the various parts of art interpretation relate to one another?
- What are the essential qualities of these parts?
- What are the constants that can't be changed?
- Have we seen this problem before? Do we know a related problem?
- If we have encountered a similar problem before, can we use its method to solve this problem?
- Can we challenge assumptions in accordance with the essential nature of our area of concern?

Our objective, of course, is to find ways to improve the methodology of interpreting pictures. A good first step would be to search for potentially useful information that pertains to the understanding of art. Later, we will need to do inter-disciplinary research and delve into diverse subject areas that may have useful ideas to offer.

We can expect to find a virtual gold mine of ideas in such areas as: the methodologies of art analysis, psychology of the arts, dream analysis theories and methods, the role of symbols in art, fine art photography (including the aesthetic theories of Hattersley and White), the philosophy of art, iconography and iconology, visual semiotics, literary criticism (including reader response theory), perception, meditation, and the principles and methods of creativity.

After the research phase has been carried out, we can apply idea generation techniques - from the field of creativity - to our specific area of interest. Very often, we will find the principle of analogy to be useful. By creating a connective link between the attributes of some other idea and a particular challenge, we can produce new insights. We can do this by seeing such a relationship on our own or we can use random stimulation to force a connection between ideas through various stimuli such as random words, pairs of random words, random pictures, or found objects.

Venturing into strange areas, which seem totally unrelated to the challenge will increase the chances of seeing the challenge in a new context. Direct analogy is probably the most productive way to generate ideas. With direct analogies we can imagine comparisons and similarities between parallel facts and events in different fields or parallel worlds.

Selecting Areas To Explore

Whenever we are seeking to look at things from a new perspective, we will need to have a critical attitude. The creative person must be willing to question and investigate everything that is generally known about any given subject. Often, it can be found that errors, omissions, and limitations exist in what we accept as the "word of an authority." We might begin our selection process by searching for errors, omissions, and limitations in knowledge that we often take for granted. If we look at everything critically, we may be able to see a pattern that will enable us to see things in a fresh new way.

Areas where little exploration has been done often hold great promise for creative work. In art interpretation, little has been done to explore and put to use new methods that involve the unconscious mind. Most attempts at understanding pictures entail finding answers as to what the design elements and symbols might mean, what are the psychological facts concerning the artist, and the historical facts that seem pertinent. Although procedures that involve dialogue with the image, contemplative meditation, and free association are also frequently used.

Contemplative meditation is an important and productive way of looking at pictures, however it is necessary to tie-in any associations that may result to the form, content, and symbols of the picture. Otherwise, these associations may mirror the viewer's identification with the picture, through projection, instead of revealing what may have been expressed in the visual image.

The importance of using methods that employ the unconscious mind was hinted at by Ehrenzweig who wrote that we pick up more from the unconscious scanning of art than we are consciously aware of - and we do so more efficiently. Therefore, a potentially rich area for investigation appears to lie in the study of dreamworking methods and Synchronicity Systems. In fact, dreamworking methods such as: Dialogue (with a figure or symbol), Symbol Amplification, Symbol Association, Dream Incubation, The Dream Report, The Key Questions Technique, and The Symbol Immersion Procedure have already shown that they can be used effectively in art interpretation.

Combining methods is very often an excellent creativity technique. Since both active and passive methods of picture analysis have demonstrated their effectiveness as tools for understanding pictures, it is logical to combine these two different approaches for a more complete and insightful understanding of art.

There are many other ways to combine "the various parts" in art interpretation. For example, an old and effective method of interpretation involves narrating in detail what is going on in a picture. We can improve on this simplistic method by also writing in the most likely meanings for whatever symbols might exist. If we make copies of the narration, we can easily write-in a variety of possible meanings for each symbol so that we can later compare them. We can then select the one narration where the symbolic meanings seem to make the most sense according to the context in which they have been used within the picture; In this way, the narration will reflect the meaning of the symbols in the picture and at the same time provide us with a verbal description of what the picture seems to be about.

When we look at a picture, we can widen our choice of symbol meanings by using a good symbol dictionary. Often, this can be important, because the personal associations that we have for a symbol are limited. Furthermore, our personal

associations may be quite different from those of the artist - particularly when cultural-differences exist.

The Use Of Synchronicity Systems In Art Interpretation

The use of the I Ching and other Synchronicity Systems, to help in the analysis of pictures, is based upon research and experimental studies that I have been carrying out since the early 1970's. But, records indicate that the I Ching was used for the purpose of dream interpretation, by the ancient Chinese, as long ago as 450 B.C.

And, in the 20th century, Jung used the I Ching in dream therapy for approximately 30 years.

Two important similarities, between dreams and visual images, suggest that Synchronicity Systems can be useful in picture analysis. First of all, both dreams and visual images use symbols to express ideas or feelings that emerge from the unconscious. Secondly, the symbols of dreams and the symbolic answers of Synchronicity Systems originate from the same source within us. In dream incubation, we are able to ask our "higher self" a question - and obtain a symbolic answer to our question in return. Synchronicity Systems work in much the same way. If we meditate on our question, while consulting the oracle, we are able to tap the unconscious source of wisdom that lies deep within us - and receive a symbolic response.

The procedure that I use, when consulting the I Ching about pictures, is to meditate on the picture for a period of time. Then, I concentrate on my question and keep it in mind while casting the hexagram. After the response of the I Ching has been noted and recorded, it is analyzed in relation to the visual image.

When using this procedure, it is important to understand how to use the I Ching (or any other Synchronicity System) effectively. And, it is important that this procedure be used along with other more traditional methods for reading a picture to insure that a comprehensive, accurate, and insightful reading will result.

When used in this way, Synchronicity Systems can help determine whether or not we are on track in our analysis of a visual image. At times, they may force us to look at a picture from a somewhat different perspective than we might otherwise. Or, they may enable us to overcome obstructions that would prevent us from understanding a visual image.

If we use more than one synchronicity system, additional insights may result because no two responses will be precisely the same. By comparing each response, to see whether they agree or conflict with one another, we can judge whether or not our interpretation of each response is likely to be accurate.

Next, we can compare these responses with the rest of our analysis of a picture - checking for any similarities or conflicts that may exist. A similarity of responses will suggest that our analysis is probably quite accurate - while areas of conflict indicate a need to re-check our interpretation of each response and to re-think our overall analysis and interpretation of the picture as well. By using this procedure, we can often obtain valuable insights concerning:

- The idea or feeling of what an artist is trying to express in an image
- The mental atmosphere surrounding the artist when an image was made
- The subconscious reason that the artist made a particular picture
- The accuracy or inaccuracy of an interpretation
- What else we might do to try to understand a picture

My exploration of these systems followed this sequence of steps:

- Using the I Ching to help me understand the meaning of my dreams
- Inquiring as to the idea or feeling expressed in some of my photographs to see if the responses of the I Ching would be as insightful with visual images as they had been with my dreams

- Exploring a variety of Synchronicity Systems (i.e. tarot cards, I Ching, and runes) to see whether the responses conflicted or agreed
- Using I Ching analysis on a photograph made by Minor White to see if the I Ching's response would be as insightful with his photograph as it had been with mine ,
- Using a variety of Synchronicity Systems, in the analysis of selected photographs of Jerry Stephany, so that I could compare similarities and differences in the responses received - and then obtain feedback from the photographer concerning the accuracy of those responses

After seeing an I Ching analysis of one of his photographs, Minor White stated in a letter dated April 13, 1970: "The I Ching version of the photograph is quite accurate! There is something in <u>you</u> that knew that. Otherwise the YE could not have interpreted accurately. How strange the YE is. It somehow gives voice to that something in us that knows everything there is to know!"

Perhaps, methods such as these could be useful in the analysis of pathological art. To explore this possibility, I used Synchronicity Systems to help analyze a centaur drawing made by a paranoid schizophrenic killer. The interpretation that resulted was then sent to the psychologist for feedback. His reply indicated that the information, obtained in this way, did agree with the Rorschach test that had been completed by the patient - but that no new insights were revealed. Even so, there may still be some value in using such procedures when analyzing pathological art because the <u>Synchronicity Systems</u>:

- can be used to help support the results of a Rorschach test - if confirmation of the test is desirable.
- can be used at any time or place - even in the absence of the patient.
- might provide useful insights about a patient's mental state if these "systems" were consulted by a psychiatrist.
- can suggest possibilities that exist within a situation - and what should probably be done as a result.

- can suggest what the future outcome is likely to be in a particular situation.

van Franz describes how these procedures can reveal what the existing probabilities and psychological consequence might be in a given situation - as well as the psychological background involved.

Creative Approaches To Associations In Art

Another area that appears to hold promise for creative exploration is that of the role of associations in art. We owe much to psychologists and psychiatrists for their research and study of associations. A philosophical model for the application and use of associations in art interpretation would be useful. By means of creative problem solving, it is possible to create such a model.

What we perceive, when we look at pictures, is closely tied-in to the associations that they evoke in us. And, associations can arise either because we coax them deliberately out of a visual image - or, because they come forth spontaneously out of our unconscious mind. They come to us from a variety of sources. Some are linked closely with the picture itself - while others are tied-in with the viewer and may have little or nothing to do with the visual image. If necessary, we will impose a meaning upon a stimulus. Something within our mind, based upon our knowledge, intellect, mental set, and emotional needs programs how the stimulus will be perceived.

Our associations, in order to be valid, should be linked to the form (or design elements), the content, and the symbols of a picture. If this is the case, then our associations will be more tied-in with the image and what it might express than with ourselves. However, to one degree or another, our associations may be the result of causes, which have more to do with ourselves than with the picture we are looking at. For example, a picture may have ambiguous figures or contours or embedded figures - that can be interpreted in one way or another. This is especially true in abstract art where non-objective forms can

suggest a particular thing to one person and something entirely different to another - much like an abstract figure in a Rorschach test. In this case, what we derive from an image is just as apt to be caused by our own projections as it is from the image itself.

Our associations and our perception of pictures are to a large extent determined by our life experiences and by our mental set - as well as by cultural, social, personal, emotional, or intellectual considerations. That is why one viewer might see something in a picture that is quite different from what another person might see.

Associations can provide us with suggestions as to what the expressive characteristics of a picture are. Nevertheless, we should only think of them as possibilities. While they can lead us to a reasonable and valid interpretation of a picture - they can mislead us as well. If associations can be tied-in to the viewer -as well as to the picture itself - then we should always challenge their validity. We can ask such questions as:

- Do they tie-in to the form, content, and symbols in a picture?
- Are they relevant to the title of a picture - if one exists?
- Are they relevant to the artist's intent - when known?
- Do they conform to historical facts?
- Are they similar to other associations evoked by a picture?
- Are my associations tied-in to the picture or far removed from it?
- Are my associations different than those of most people?
- Can my associations stand the test of time? Can they endure?
- Do my associations evoke a response within me that seems to "click"?

It is possible for several different associations to be valid-and for some to be more valid than others. Those associations that are tied-in with the artist's intent and historical facts are the most valid but other valid associations may still

provide us with valuable insights concerning a picture since many pictures can be expressive at more than one level.

Some Useful Techniques That Can Help To Create Associations

Valid associations come to us from the design elements in a picture, from the meaning (or meanings) that we ascribe to the content of a picture, and from the symbols that exist within a picture. They come to us on both a conscious and an unconscious level throughout the viewing experience. By understanding what brings associations into existence, we can bring forth an abundance of them into our conscious awareness whenever we may look at a picture. And, if we have a large number of associations to select from, it is more probable that we will find some that can provide us with appropriate insights and useful perspectives concerning a visual image.

Abell wrote: "No association is by nature inherently irrelevant to the experience of art, provided it fuses with the other phases of that experience and so becomes an integral part of it."

Associations And The Subconscious

Most often, associations run effortlessly between the subconscious and the surface mind. The associations should be sorted out - and the ones that seem to pertain to the picture isolated. The viewer should let associations rise within himself or herself by contemplative meditation, scanning everything in the picture, and then asking the following questions:

- What do the various parts of the picture remind me of visually?
- Does the image have human or animal-like shapes or qualities?
- What feelings do I get from the image?
- What does the image as a whole suggest to me?

Associations may lead us far away from what is obviously part of the picture content; but, no harm is done,

because part of the experience of a picture is sorting out all the associations that a picture arouses in us to find the one which is most pertinent to the picture and to ourselves.

An Active Approach To Associations

In order to understand pictures, we should look at them in a state of heightened awareness. It is helpful to describe and write down everything that we are aware of. No detail should be overlooked because it may be important to our understanding of a picture. Ask questions about every element of the picture and what it might suggest, such as:

- What does the title of the picture suggest - if one exists?
- What is the subject of the picture?
- What action takes place in the picture?
- What person or object receives the action in the picture?
- What is the setting where the action takes place?
- What do the various tonal areas suggest?
- What do the light areas suggest?
- What do the dark areas suggest?
- What do the middle tone areas suggest?
- What do the tonal areas suggest when viewed together?
- What does "the negative space" between figures suggest?
- What does the use of space in the picture suggest?
- What does the lighting suggest?
- What do the various design elements in the picture suggest?
- What associations do the various symbols evoke in us?

Triggering Associations With Dreamworking Methods

Dreamworking methods hold great promise for helping us to better understand pictures. Symbol Association is the primary dreamworking method described by art educators as a means of understanding art. Although, Symbol Amplification; Dialoguing; The Picture Report Method; The Key Questions Method; The Title, Theme, Affect, Question Method;' and Dream Incubation can also be effective. Symbol amplification

was preferred by Jung over symbol association because symbol amplification stays focused on the symbol itself, reflecting on its inherent qualities and essential characteristics.

Free association is not without its dangers. It can lead to associations that may be tied-in more to ourselves and our unconscious than to the picture itself. Jung recognized this danger. Jolande Jacobi wrote:"Jung does not work with 'free associations' but employs a method he calls 'amplification'. Free association, he believes, always leads to a complex, but we can never be certain whether it is precisely this one that constitutes the meaning of the dream ..."

Of course, this would apply just as much to the use of free association in art interpretation as it does to dream analysis. This does not mean that free association cannot be useful in art interpretation. But, it does mean that we must be careful that our associations do not go too far afield and that they are always tied-in to the artwork itself. In view of this, it is surprising that symbol amplification is not used to the same extent as free association in order to understand the meaning of a symbol in art.

In symbol association, we start with one symbol and leap to another and another and another. In contrast, amplification stays focused on the symbol itself, reflecting on its inherent qualities and essential characteristics. Amplification evokes symbol-inherency rather than symbol-linking.

Amplification involves the conscious enumeration of a symbol's generally recognized characteristics, both sensory and functional. Amplification studies the characteristics and functions of a particular symbol, asking what is unique about it visually and functionally.

We can explore the meaning of a symbol, through amplification, by asking these questions:

- What are some of the ways this symbol functions in life?
- What are the unique qualities and functions of this symbol?
- How does the symbol function in the picture?
- How does the symbol relate to other symbols in the picture?
- What is the context within which it operates?

- **What actions and feelings does it evoke from other subjects?**

Symbol association is symbol-linking. It answers such questions as: What does this remind me of? Or, What comes into my mind when I think of this symbol? Whereas symbol amplification tends to be objective, symbol association evokes a personal response.

Let me conclude by describing two methods for generating ideas that were derived from the literature on the subject of creativity. Both of these methods can be used to generate new associations in order to help us to better understand a visual image:

1. Stimulating The Mind To Create Associations Through Analogies

We can use stimuli - such as interesting pictures, found objects, random words, or pairs of random words - to help stimulate our mind and to create analogies (or associations) between the stimuli and the picture that we are trying to understand. The purpose behind this is to draw analogies between these stimuli and the picture we are studying in order to create associations which may be insightful.

To do this, we will need to ask ourself: What do these stimuli have in common with the picture that we are analyzing? Then, when we are in the process of selecting a stimulus we must keep in mind the picture we are studying throughout the stimuli selection procedure. The picture that we are analyzing may in some way influence our unconscious mind to select certain stimuli if it will help us to better understand a particular image.

While it is not practical to keep a picture with us constantly, it is possible to visualize the picture in our mind occasionally and to keep the desire to better understand it in our consciousness. It is important to remember that if we really want to understand a picture, our unconscious mind will help us to work out the solution.

When using this technique, we should try to break down the stimuli into their elements, and then apply these traits to helping us solve the task of understanding a visual image. Our objective is to identify the characteristics and then meld them to our task. We should not concentrate on the stimuli, but on the elements that make it what it is. To do this, we may use either a related or unrelated stimulus and list all of the features, traits, and elements that we can find in it by looking at it up close and from different angles and list emotional, physical, or interactive elements. What features, elements, or mechanisms make our stimulus move, act, or deliver excitement? How could these elements be applied to the picture that we are trying to understand? Are there abstract elements in the stimuli that we can relate in any way to the picture that we are trying to understand? We can do this technique with any stimuli, but when we are getting started, we will probably find it best to use stimuli that are in some way similar or related to our challenge.

2. Topsy-Turvy Looking

By turning an abstract picture upside down, or on its side, it is possible to coax additional associations out of it. If we are unsure what an abstract picture might express, or if we would like to try to coax other free associations out of a picture, this procedure can be quite helpful. Ask ourselves: What does the picture seem to suggest if it is viewed in this way? Is it similar to or different than what the image seems to suggest when it is viewed correctly? In what way or ways has the picture seemed to change? Pictures and their detailed interpretation will be published separately by the author.

The author is willing to discuss any further questions the readers may have about the special methods of interpretations described in this article.

Some Final Thoughts

Art has many different aspects to it. As a result, philosophical theories have sprung up which create code models designed to help us interpret each aspect in a meaningful way. There is a Code Model to help us to understand all levels of meaning within a work of art. It deals with art as a language sign system and it helps us to read symbolic images. The Communication Model helps us to understand how a work of art functions as a communicative action. And, the Cultural Model helps us to understand the context of a work in the world of the artist and the influences of that culture on the work. In actuality, we might say that a Psychoanalytic Code Model also exists which helps us to understand the psychological influences on the artist and their effect on a work of art.

Since there are so many different aspects to art, no single approach can embrace them all. But, we can use the principles of creativity to create a "comprehensive approach" for viewing art that will allow us to work within the constraints of art's essential characteristics. We must also, of course, work within the constraints imposed upon us by the limits of our interest in a particular image and by the amount of time that we are willing to devote to it.

There are an infinite number of ways to look at art. But, if we apply the principles of creativity when we try to interpret it, we will be able to wade through this labyrinth of possibilities and find some ways that are effective. If we are successful, we will be able to see art with perception and understanding. If not, we may see it with the frustrations of a child or with the delusions of a fool.

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