



# U M M A

**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
MUSEUM OF ART**

Visual Literacy is a process for looking carefully and exploring art on a deeper level. By discussing art observation as a group, we encourage you to go beyond interpretation and to make connections with course themes and concepts, as well as connections to global issues. We foster critical thinking in the general sense, and employ Gholdy Muhammad's concept of Criticality, defined as "the capacity and ability to read, write, think, and speak in ways to understand power and equity in order to understand and promote anti-oppression". UMMA's process of viewing art is a 3 step process -- **See, Think, Connect (Question)** -- but is cyclical in nature. The more we connect and question the work, the more it causes us to continue looking and thinking.

## VISUAL LITERACY & CRITICALITY AT UMMA

### SEE

What do you see? Seeing involves recognizing or connecting the information the eyes take in with your previous knowledge and experiences in order to create meaning. This requires time and attention, which is where close looking and observation comes into play. It is here that the viewer begins to build up a mental inventory of the image's visual elements. Describing out loud can help you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you have seen. What figures, objects, and settings do you recognize? What do you not recognize, and how do you describe those?

### THINK

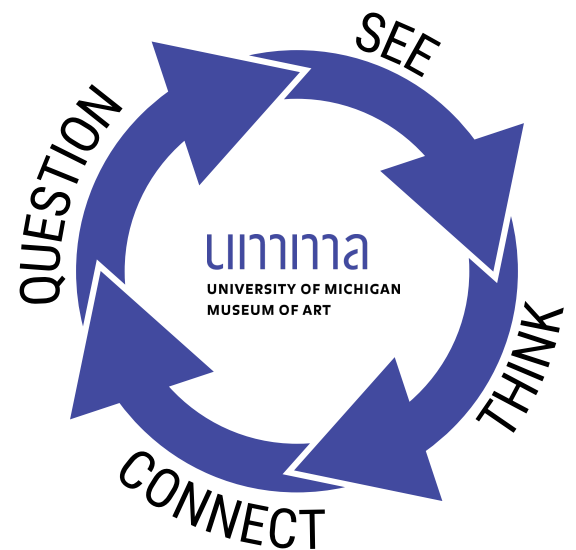
Thinking requires analysis, which uses the details you identified in your descriptions and applies reason to make meaning. This is also an opportunity to consider how the figures, objects, and settings you identified in your description fit together to tell a story. Interpretation combines our descriptions and analysis with our previous knowledge and any information we have about the artist and the work.

### CONNECT

Connection, the final step in UMMA's process, takes the interpretation and meaning-making a step further. How is what you are describing connected to the materials in your course? How has what you have learned influenced your thinking process? Also, how does this work relate to the world around you? Consider educator Gholdy Muhammed's concept of criticality: "Unlike lower case "c" critical, which is just deep and analytical thinking, Critical with a capital "C" is related to power, equity, and anti-oppression."

#### ...QUESTION

The natural by-product of making connections with the art is to also have questions. Asking questions gets the group to return to the artwork and the process of seeing, or to the group as a discussion to answer the question. Oftentimes we come up with questions we can't immediately answer, and this encourages us to find out the answer elsewhere.



#### Did you know...

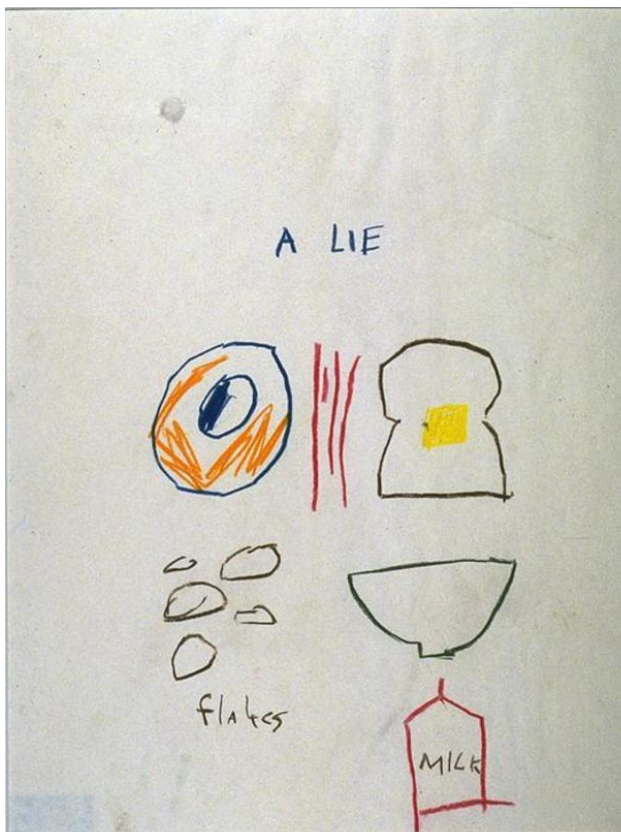
The average person spends 17 seconds looking at a work of art in a museum. It usually takes much less time than that to identify an image. But making meaning from it? That requires slowing down and taking the time to see the details. This kind of thoughtful, close-looking helps us to see that things are not always as they appear at first glance. Discussing this as a group encourages us to see the various meanings our personal backgrounds and experiences add to our interpretations.

## WHAT IS THE FIRST THING WE WILL ASK YOU?

### DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEE!

Think of it as describing everything you see to someone who is not looking at the artwork. Nothing is too obvious! While it may feel weird and unnecessary, this helps us do several things. For one, we are slowing down and taking in a careful inventory of the work, making sure not to miss anything. A tendency with this first step is to jump to interpretation and connection making. For example, when describing this work, would you say you see breakfast? Or you see a piece of toast? Or would you slow down even further and describe the forms and the colors you see? By describing out loud as a group, we are also helping each other notice things that we might not have otherwise alone. It's in this description phase that we already start to notice observational differences.

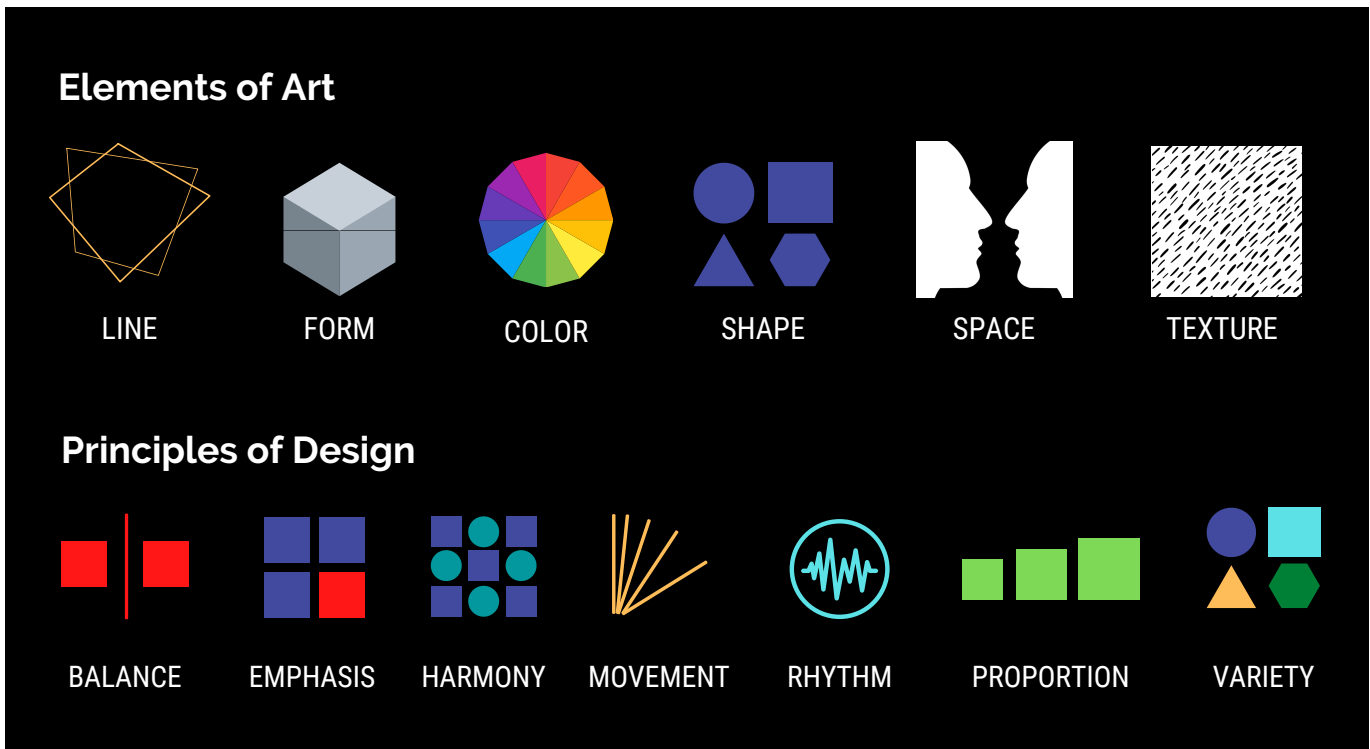
### Take the work below for example:



**Jean-Michel Basquiat, *A Lie*, 1981**, colored crayons on paper, 24 in x 18 in (60.96 cm x 45.72 cm), Gift of Arthur Cohen in honor of Ben and Yetta Cohen, 1985/2.18.

People interpret the round orange and blue object differently! Some say it's a fried egg, others have said a bagel, donut, or avocado! And that is fantastic! Once we notice as a group how we see some things differently, it helps us understand how we might then interpret the image differently. This is why it's helpful for us to slow down and describe literally what we see! So an example might be: "I see a round form with blue and orange, maybe drawn with a crayon, it makes me think of a bagel!" **How would you describe this work? What do you think the round object is?**

## ELEMENTS OF ART



Knowing the *Elements of Art* and *Principles of Design* are helpful in describing what we see, but don't feel like you need to memorize them. We actually unconsciously notice these when looking at art. Having them listed here can be helpful if you don't know where to start with a work of art. What is also unique about a museum experience is that you are seeing different objects purposefully placed together in a space. You are seeing an individual's choice in what and how they display the objects, and how they choose to interpret them (often in wall labels and introductory panels). Describing how different objects could be related or connected, as well as analyzing the institutional voice that is behind the exhibit, is also useful in understanding art.



**Harry Brorby, *The Operation*, 1964, lithograph on paper, 22 1/16 x 30 1/8 in. (55.9 x 76.5 cm), Museum Purchase, 1965/2.16.**

**What elements can you articulate with this work?**



## What do you think is going on here?

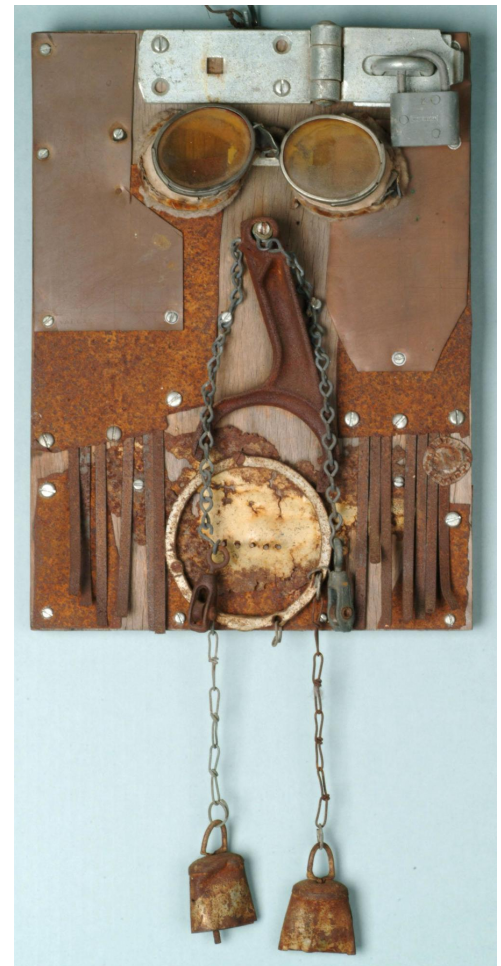
Thinking requires analysis, which uses the details you identified in your descriptions and applies reason to make meaning. Analysis is also an opportunity to consider how the figures, objects and settings you identified in your description fit together to tell a story. Interpretation combines our descriptions and analysis with our previous knowledge and any information we have about the artist and the work. Interpretation allows us to draw conclusions about the image, leading us to the final step, connection.

There are different things that we key into when analyzing art: **Material, Process, Symbols, Context, and Meaning.**

### Material

Artists often have meaning behind the type of materials, and how they are used, in their artwork. Discussing the materials and what they could represent is one way of understanding a work of art. For example, take George Vargas *Michigan Worker* (below). Created when Vargas was a student at the University of Michigan, "Michigan Worker" draws on the tradition of the found object and junk art, as well as a figurative tradition, which he evokes by using industrial materials representing the working class Michigan automotive worker.

**What various materials do you see here?  
How might you interpret or making meaning from them?**



**George Vargas, *Michigan Worker***, welding goggles, metal, hanging bells, rusty bottle cap, pulleys, chains, and padlock mounted on plywood, 20 7/8 in x 10 3/8 in x 2 9/16 in (53.02 cm x 26.35 cm x 6.51 cm), Gift of the artist, 2004/1.153.

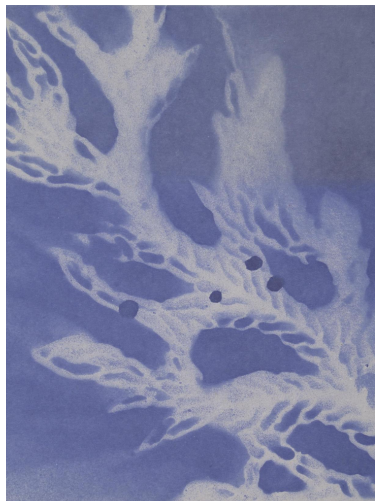
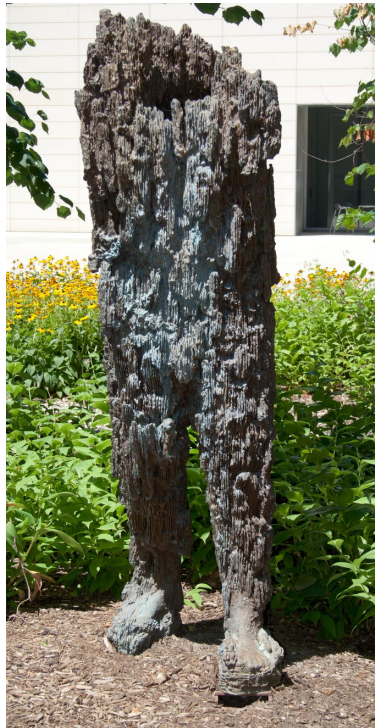


## Process

Have you ever heard of the phrase "artistic process"? Artists will likely spend more time on the preparation of a work of art than on the final art piece itself. The artistic process is a unique combination of vision, creativity, intuition, and collaboration balanced with craft, technique, accountability, discipline, and use of time and resources. This will be unique to every art discipline as well as to every artist. A sculptor, for example, often makes multiple sketches of an idea and objects before ever touching clay or marble. Sometimes they could play around with different materials as well, before deciding what fits their vision and meaning. Sometimes a process can look like an artist having a specific vision and sketches, but the actual artwork was formed by a team of workers with the artist acting as overseer.

This sculpture on the left is by Michele Oka Doner titled *Strider* and is one of three Doner sculptures installed together between UMMA and Tappan Hall—*Angry Neptune*, *Salacia* and *Strider*. In describing her process with this piece, Doner said, "Strider was named because the giant is taking a stride. It seemed this movement was a defining characteristic as the wax occupied the same space as Neptune and Salacia....I think Strider resonated with the powerful giants". In addition to her outdoor sculptures, we have several of her sketches and drawings in our collection as well, which helps us to see how Michele's process goes from 2D drawings to 3D sculpture.

**So when thinking about a work of art it's also helpful to question, How was this work made? What was the artist's process before they made this work?**



**Top Left: Michele Oka Doner, *Strider*, 2008**, Museum purchase made possible by a bequest from Clarence and Ruth Roy, the W. Hawkins Ferry Fund, and the support of the artist, 2009/1.468. **Top Right: *Primal*, 2008**, Given in honor for former Director James Steward for his contribution to UMMA, 2010/2.52. **Bottom Left: *Workbook*, 2004**, Gift of the artist, 2007/2.77.1. **Bottom Right: *Untitled*, 2004**, Gift of the artist, 2007/2.77.2

## Symbols

Symbols—things that have a specific meaning or that represent something else—are a powerful part of how we understand the visual world. We recognize symbols by using personal knowledge gained through memory and lived experience. Many of the objects crowded on the tabletop here—the empty cups lying on their sides, the globe with figures of the zodiac, the skull, the extinguished candle—evoke the passage of time, impermanence, and the transience of human life. This type of painting is known as a *vanitas*, a still life based on the opening passage of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which declares “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” *Vanitas* still-life painting first appeared in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century.

**What other symbols can you identify here?**



**Willem Claesz Heda, *Vanitas (Still Life)*, with globe, skull, candle, tazza, and covered cup, 1633 – 1635, Museum Purchase, 1965/2.55**

## Context

Culture and history influence how and what we see. Much of our reaction to an image depends on the context we see it in. **What was the artist trying to convey and how does this relate to the time and place in which the work was created? Similarly, how do the values and beliefs of our own society shape our understanding of an image?**

John Mix Stanley, a painter and a trained photographer, accompanied several expeditions to the American frontier. He painted this view of Mount Hood in the Oregon territory from memory with the aid of sketches and photographs. Stanley viewed himself as an anthropologist recording threatened peoples and cultures and was best known for his representations of Indigenous people.



**John Stanley, *Mount Hood from The Dalles*, 1871, Gift of Mrs. Edith Stanley Bayles and the late Mrs. Jane C. Stanley, 1940.426**



Here he includes an encampment of Indigenous people in the painting's middle ground, but his intentions in documenting Indigenous life were complicated. Stanley created traveling shows and "Indian" panoramas that perpetuated stereotypes and catered to an audience largely supportive of policies that caused the wholesale decimation of Indigenous communities. Whether it was intentional or not, Stanley's work reinforced the idea that the United States was destined to "civilize" Indigenous people and justified westward expansion.

## Meaning

Meaning-making is not necessarily a separate form of analysis, but rather the last phase of analysis. We begin to understand the purpose of the artwork, discover the artist's intended meaning, and expand on the number of other interpretations based on the composition, memory, life experiences, history, culture, etc.

Through the acts of shredding, cutting, shrouding, tarring, erasing, breaking, and nailing, the Kalamazoo-born artist Titus Kaphar sheds light on unspoken truths in our country's history, examining how histories have been rewritten, distorted, reimagined, and understood. *Flay (James Madison)*, is one of several portraits in a series where Kaphar scrutinizes the Founding Fathers of the United States. As national figures, the Founding Fathers are revered as great men who fought against the tyranny of British rule and achieved liberty for the colonies. The complications of their story come from the fact that many of these men simultaneously participated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This "flayed" portrait of Madison features fringes of cut canvas hung with nails, clearly revealing/unveiling his lesser widely known role as an owner of more than 300 enslaved individuals.



**Titus Kaphar, *Flay (James Madison)*, 2019,** Museum Purchase made possible by Joseph and Annette Allen, 2019/2.184

**How does Titus Kaphar's manipulation of the portrait of James Madison affect how you think about him and his history? About the history of founding fathers?**



## How is this work connected to your course? To global and personal issues?

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Take for example these three previously mentioned works. In recent times, growing public awareness of the continued reverberations of the legacy of slavery and colonization has challenged museums to examine the uncomfortable histories contained in our collections and challenged the public to probe the choices we make about those stories. Choices about which artists you see in our galleries, choices about what relevant facts we share about the works, and choices about what - out of an infinite number of options - we don't say about them.

The top two pieces here were made at a time when the world came to be shaped by the ideologies of colonial expansion and Western domination. And yet, that history and the stories of those marginalized do not readily appear in the still lifes and portraits on display in most museums, including our own, which Kaphar's *Flay* intends to call our attention to. By grappling with what is visible and what remains hidden, we are forced to examine whose stories and histories are prioritized and why.

**Looking at these objects, how can these be used to discuss the effects of colonialism and slavery?**

**Do any of these make you think about anything going on in the world around you? To your own history?**

