



Visual Literacy: How to Look at Art

Dr. Nancy G. Heller

Monday-Thursday, January 26-29, 2026 – 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Robert Atkins, *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present* (3rd ed., 2013, Abbeville Press)

“ ”, *ArtSpoke: A Guide to Modern Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1848-1944* (1993, Abbeville Press)

Michael Cothran and Anne D’Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (3rd ed., 2021, Laurence King Publishing)

James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (2nd. ed.) (Routledge, 2014)

Nancy G. Heller, *Why a Painting is Like a Pizza: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Modern Art* (Princeton University Press, 2002)

W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Art History* (1971, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston; reprinted by MART in 1989)

NAMES, TERMS, & CONCEPTS

Session #1:

visual literacy/art appreciation/art history

formalism

visual elements of art (line, shape, texture, space, color)

traditional printmaking techniques (relief [woodcuts, linoleum cuts]; intaglio [etching];

lithography)

linear vs. painterly

abstract, stylized art

a dancer’s “line”

geometric vs. biomorphic forms

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sfumato

the Northern (vs. Italian) Renaissance

grisaille, odalisque

pediments

color in classical Greco-Roman sculpture

Session #2:

art, visual arts, the arts (including performing arts), fine art, “commercial” art (graphic design)

principles of design (unity, balance, scale, emphasis)
Pointillism
symmetrical, asymmetrical composition
pyramidal composition
tondo
ikebana
alloverness
context (where the artwork was originally intended to be seen)
motion (actual, and implied); Italian Futurism
late 19th-century experimental photography (Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey)
Howard Edgerton (stroboscopic photography)
Op Art (optical illusions, “psychedelic” art)
kinetic sculpture

SESSION #3:

iconography (in art-historical usage)
story-quilt
mythology (vs. “religion”)
attributes (noun)
Virgin of Guadalupe
The Annunciation
triptych
Flemish, Netherlandish art
aerial perspective in visual art
donors (toward a major artwork)
eucharistic doves
gilded (gilt) copper
enamel work (*champlevé*, + other techniques)
pyx
Vanitas paintings
symbolism of dancers’ hands (classical ballet mime; Bharatanatyam *mudras*; flamenco)

SESSION #4:

New Yorker magazine covers and cartoons
“Eustace Tilley”
monotypes (a.k.a. monoprints)
Japanese *sumi-e* ink paintings
Mary Boone
Jeff Koons
Beeple and N.F.T.s (non-fungible tokens); A.I.-related issues
encyclopedic vs. specialized museums
permanent collections; acquiring and de-accessioning art
temporary, site-specific installations
illustration
self-taught (naïve, outsider, folk, “primitive”) artists
Gee’s Bend quilts

academic painting
Orientalism, colonialism
Rococo, Baroque styles
The Elgin marbles; Melina Mercouri
repatriation of artworks
1913 Armory Show (NYC)
Georg Baselitz

[N.B.: my TSA handouts normally include a section of "Principal Artworks Discussed." However, since this seminar is about quick visual comparisons among a great many different artworks, vs. in-depth discussions of just a few, such a list proved untenable. Feel free to email me with any questions, at NGHeller@aol.com.]

OTHER RESOURCES

2010 play, "Red" by John Logan (about Mark Rothko)
2007 documentary film, "Ellsworth Kelly: Fragments," by Edgar Howard & Tom Piper
2018 documentary about the art market, "The Price of Everything," by Nathaniel Kahn
anything on the art21.org website (artist interviews and short documentaries)

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