Lois Fichner-Rathus, *Understanding Art*, 11th Edition

**Chapter 1: *Understanding Art***

**Introduction for Instructors**

Chapter 1 helps students to understand and use terms that will be helpful for the remainder of the course. Many students find it challenging to talk about art, because they’ve seen it all their lives but haven’t studied art as part of their formal educational experiences. The material in this chapter creates an opportunity for the class to discuss what art is and what art can do. During this discussion, it’s a good idea to encourage students to talk about their possible preconceived notions about art—that studying art isn’t a “useful” part of a college degree, that only realistic art is “good,” etc.

**Student Learning Objectives**

* Use appropriate terminology for describing subject, content, form, and style in art.
* List visual elements and design principles that create artistic form.
* Explain the importance of artistic medium and technique.
* Define specific terms for types of artistic styles.

**Suggested Activities**

* Give students additional works of art to practice close observation and how to distinguish subject, form, and content. If you choose an artistic example with less-than-obvious iconography (see, for example, [Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation*](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/visit-the-museum/15-masterpieces/work-card/obra/the-annunciation/)), you can also encourage them to recognize when they need to investigate further to fully understand content. Ask students (in small groups or as a class) to list specific observations about the work of art, and then sort them into categories. Which details establish the work’s subject? Which details contribute to the work’s form? Which details suggest other aspects of the work’s content (aside from its subject matter), such as themes, contexts, and symbols?
* Sometimes students are so excited to identify specific symbols that they don’t take the next step of asking how iconography adds up to create larger themes and meanings. A useful discussion strategy is to return to works of art from Chapter 1 that contain lots of specific symbols (for example, Bronzino’s *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time* or van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait*) and ask students to develop broad statements of how iconography contributes to the painting’s overall statement about its subject.
* Understanding style means looking at multiple examples to see what they have in common. If you show students a number of examples representing one artistic style (such as the ones from [the essay on Impressionism from the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm)), they should be able to generate a list of common subject matter, visual features, and techniques that typify the style. A variation on this activity is to mix up examples representing two different artistic styles (contrasting Impressionism with [Cubism](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm), for example), and challenge students to sort them into stylistic categories, explaining the reasons for their choices.
* Focus on the veristic sculptural style of the Roman Republican period (see [this discussion of an example from Smarthistory](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/roman-republic/a/head-of-a-roman-patrician)) to help students distinguish between art that is representational and art this is realistic in the sense of lacking idealism.
* It’s interesting to compare and contrast where various observers place the line between art that is abstract and art that is nonobjective. The examples of Cubism above can serve as discussion prompts for this question. Another good example is [Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51449.html). In most classrooms, you’ll find students who see the painting as nonobjective, and asking those who see the abstract subject matter to point it out to those who don’t is a good warm-up activity early in the term.

**YouTube Playlist**

* [Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione (LearnExploreTHINK)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar_rnKOaKDA&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd)
* [Wassily Kandinsky, Composition VII (Smarthistory)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i16sGRY7SZ4&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd&index=2)
* [Bronzino, An Allegory with Venus and Cupid (Smarthistory)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6w2E8G0sEPc&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd&index=3)
* [Van Eyck, Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife (Smarthistory)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U38V_XwaRxM&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd&index=4)
* [Why is That Important?: Looking at Jackson Pollock (Smarthistory)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NT0SHjOowLA&index=5&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd)
* [Iktinos and Kallikrates, The Parthenon (Smarthistory)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWDflkBZC6U&index=6&list=PLCsLxBQfl2RRwBlBsH4SnMC0UghFRI6Nd)

**Other Online Resources**

* [The Power of Patience: Teaching Students the Value of Deceleration and Immersive Attention (Harvard Magazine)](http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/11/the-power-of-patience)
* [Fra Angelico’s The Annunciation (Smarthistory)](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/painting-in-florence/v/fra-angelico-the-annunciation-c-1438-47)
* [Roman Portrait Sculpture: The Stylistic Cycle (The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History)](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd_ropo2.htm)
* [Abstract vs. Non-Representational (HumanitiesWeb)](http://www.humanitiesweb.org/spa/rai/ID/558)