



Lesson 10: Photography and Visual Literacy

Background

In an increasingly visual world, learning how to describe and analyze artworks can help us understand the messages we receive in video and print. A classic way to improve visual literacy is by practicing describing historical artworks and connecting the image to its historical context. When describing an artwork, consider the subject, but also where your eye lands first (the focal point), the objects your eye is drawn to in the artwork, how your eye moves through the artwork, and how the background/setting contributes to your response. To strengthen your skills, think about why your eye is guided to certain parts of the artwork--people looking out, contrasts between light and dark, extended hands, or visible objects, for example. Think about how the order in which we view objects, which conveys relative importance, and how the types of forms we see in an artwork tells a story.

Prompt

How do we describe a photograph? Can we read information from a photograph in the same way we read a book? Use photographs to perform an exercise in visual literacy.

Reference Image



[Freedom Seeker], carte-de-visite, September, 1862, James P. Ball, Library of Congress.

Academic Fields

Fine Arts:

- Apply relevant vocabulary to define and describe works of art.
- Interpret art by analyzing the characteristics of its context and media.
- Connect various art forms to their social, cultural, or historical purposes.

- Build relevant vocabulary to describe and analyze works of art.
- Distinguish visual characteristics related to the meaning of works of art.
- Interpret how community context, beliefs, and resources influence works of art.
- Discover how cultural differences impact personal perceptions.
- Identify aesthetic choices within works of art.
- Increase relevant vocabulary to describe and analyze components related to visual art.
- Identify the relationships between community or cultural values and trends in visual art.
- Understand how works of art reflect diverse communities, viewpoints, and perspectives.
- Recognize contributions of the visual arts in everyday life.
- Examine personal and social contexts related to works of art.
- Examine various aesthetic theories and visual culture.

Documentary Reference Clips

Clip 1: James Presley Ball, 22:32 - 30:35.

Clip 2: Civil War, Documenting the Underground Railroad: 33:16 - 35:47.

Discussion Questions

- How do photographs from the documentary read to a modern audience?
- How does our interpretation of an artwork change once we look at the composition more closely, learn more about the aesthetic norms of time, and read about historical context?

Activities

- Describe *Freedom Seeker*. How many figures are there? How are they dressed? What type of objects are they carrying? How do the figures relate to one another in pose, gaze, or gestures?
- After describing the composition, propose an analysis that reflects what you think the artist intended to depict.
- After analysis, review historical accounts and context. Does the interpretation align with what is happening?
- What about the historical context might have changed the way the original viewers saw what was happening? Do you think they would have understood the image more easily than contemporary audiences based on perspective, aesthetic, and historical context?

Online Resources

- [Freedom Seeker] photograph: A number of scholars, including Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller, University of Cincinnati, have conducted extensive research on this rare photograph which is preserved in the Library of Congress (see link below). The carte-de-visite, taken by James Ball, documents a rare moment on the Underground Railroad. Our knowledge of this image stems from several resources:
- The [Freedom Seeker] photographs, Library of Congress. LOC title: *Jesse L. Berch, quartermaster sergeant, 22 Wisconsin Regiment of Racine, Wis. [and] Frank M. Rockwell, postmaster 22 Wisconsin of Geneva, Wis. / J. P. Ball's Photographic Gallery, No. 30 West 4th St., betw. Main and Walnut Sts. Cincinnati, O.* Library of Congress Archive link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017659644/>
- An autobiography written by Levi Coffin. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the underground railroad: being a brief history of the labors of a lifetime in behalf of the slave, with the stories of numerous fugitives, who gained their freedom through his instrumentality, and many other incidents.* "Rescue of a Slave Girl by Two Union Soldiers," pp. 606 – 618, Library of Congress Archive link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/13005748/>
- E.B. Quinner's Military History of Wisconsin, Chapter 30, 22 Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, p. 698 (Cincinnati and Kentucky). Wisconsin Historical Society Archive link: <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/quiner/id/16635>

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Williams, W. George, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, Volume II, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1983. Descriptions of Cincinnati with section on Alex S. Thomas, pp. 179-181.

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