

'BREAKING ART'S SILENCE'

Using the Visual Arts in the English classroom

Jacqueline Attard

'Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is. Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable in this respect for in the original the silence and stillness permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. This has the effect of closing the distance in time between the painting of the picture and one's own act of looking at it... What we make of that painted moment when it is before our eyes depends upon what we expect of art, and that in turn depends today upon how we have already experienced the meaning of paintings through reproductions.'

John Berger



JACQUELINE ATTARD is a PGCE student. She has a B.A. (Hons.) in Fine Arts, English and American Literature, and Medieval and Renaissance studies from New York University and has recently completed the TEFL Certificate Course given by the University of Malta at The Gozo Centre. She has also been involved in EFL teaching for two years.

IT was my first and only trip to Spain. I was a mere seventh grader, (in the seventh year or primary school in New York at age twelve) anxious to absorb every possible sight. One day, my parents and I entered an art museum in a city that appeared to have an atmosphere of medieval times, yet in most respects was quite modern, Madrid. The beautiful boulevard of Prado seemed to radiate from a central square. As I entered the museum, it seemed as if I was surrounded by a series of magnificent paintings.

I was struck by a painting that seemed silent and still, yet invited conversation, 'Las Meninas', or 'Maids of Honor'. These almost life-sized figures appeared to be extremely realistic. My first impression resulted in an attempt to interrogate the painting, to get it to speak, or to engage with the past in some form of dialogue. I was eager to unlock its secrets. I wanted to establish a kind of relationship with this work of art, that is, to discover its meaning or to create a new one for myself.

'WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?'

At first I was concerned with the relationship between the painted figures and the viewer. The foreground seemed most significant. I thought, 'What is that guy with the cross on his chest, that bizarre elderly looking girl, those other two central girls, and the dog looking at?' I felt a strong sense that they were gazing at me. I suddenly felt like an intruder who was disturbing their usual daily activities. It was as if I had become a part of

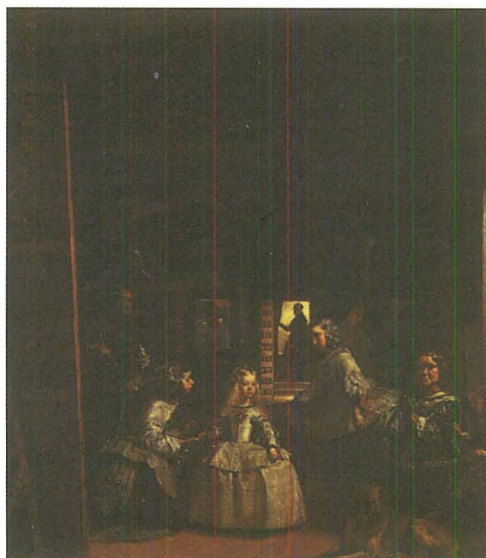
this painting and was experiencing some sort of mental connection with this work of art.

'WHAT IS DEPICTED IN THE BACKGROUND OF THAT PAINTING? IS THAT OBJECT BESIDE THE DOOR IN THE BACKGROUND A PAINTING OR IS IT A MIRROR?'

I soon felt as if it was the latter, and had a kind of revelation. That must be who the other people are staring at! Then I noticed the easel and paint brush in the left foreground. This must be why that man looks as if he is staring at me, the viewer. He must be making a portrait of a royal couple. Finally, I came to the conclusion that this must be an artist's studio after I noticed the dark frames of the other paintings in the background. Understanding this was an exhilarating experience. For me, it

Las Meninas, by Velásquez

The Beheading of St. John, by Caravaggio



continued overleaf

“What a painting might be made to say depends upon the viewer’s expectations, his or her sense of the questions that seem appropriate or possible”

Velázquez is a virtuoso in the handling of space and light



soon became clear that a painting begins to speak if one approaches it properly by asking questions of the past.

Four years later, I studied this painting in Art History class. The following is a quotation taken from my text:

‘Velázquez is a virtuoso in the handling of space and light. With the utmost precision, he has organized the picture into a series of receding planes, and by doing so, he gives the figures their special relationships. The first plane is in the front of the picture itself where the king and queen are standing. Next comes that in which the principal group stands in the light of the window at the right, which provides the brilliant illumination. The light here is balanced by that from the door at the rear. In between is the intermediate plane with the figure of Velázquez and the attendants, who are shown in more subdued light. The space is broken up geometrically into a pattern of rectangles, such as the floor, ceiling, the easel, the pictures hanging on the wall.’

Then I learned that the monarch Philip IV appointed Velázquez as his court painter, therefore, it is Velázquez who is wearing the cross of the Order of Santiago, which was conferred on him by the king. So my first impression was almost correct, I guess that the only details that I missed were the techniques plus some history. What I did learn enhanced this painting, however, could there not be numerous interpretations of the same painting?

A year after my Art History course I again visited Europe but this time I had a different appreciation of what I saw. I visited the island of Malta where I saw one of Caravaggio’s originals, ‘The Beheading of St. John The Baptist’. I suddenly began analyzing the use of dramatic chiaroscuro, or the use of light and dark to shift emphasis as well as the usage of lines, groupings, and colour that lead the eye to the central figure.

Here, after studying Caravaggio’s use of lines, I found myself explaining to my friend for over ten minutes how the lines of the two prisoners in the right background form a triangle. Then, I began to explicate its symbolism of the Holy Trinity and how these lines point to the central foreground’s Holy figure. But could this not have been simply a depiction of two men interested in the commotion of the foreground? Was I seeing more than what the artist wanted to convey? I now realize that what a painting might be made to say depends upon the viewer’s expectations, his or her sense of the questions that seem appropriate or possible. This, in turn is created via one’s schemata. Personal experiences add to one’s interpretative skills and may alter any previous ideas about the issue.

Furthermore, I looked with ‘art-seeing eyes’, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they knew art to possess. A powerful sense of determination overcame me to see connections within this painting.

What I now realize is that I placed less emphasis on observing that which seemed

evident, that is, the figure of St. John on the floor in a prison yard with his arms bound, the executioner with his left hand lying on the Saint’s head while in his right he holds a knife which he is about to finish off the task with, and Salom(who is holding the platter ready to receive the head of St. John.

However, was everything that seemed evident to me evident to everyone else who saw the same painting? Not necessarily as we shall see in a lesson where this painting was discussed in a conversation session in an English as a foreign language classroom. Different individuals with different backgrounds brought various interpretations of the painting. In reality it may require a great deal of interpretation and knowledge for a non-Roman Catholic individual to identify Salom(and St. John the Baptist. It was evident for me because I was raised reading about and studying the lives of religious figures. Someone else may view this scene as a primitive form of execution. From this experience of looking at this painting, I have learned that everyone analyses and sees things differently because each individual has certain experiences and knowledge that are applied toward and brought into their interpretation. We are each a product of our culture and experiences. Ideas, feelings, ways of being, thinking, and actions are influenced by a larger, organized force, society.

Society’s key effect

Society has a key effect on how one reads things. One’s schemata is important in interpreting and discussing that interpretation. The individual, however, may not realize this at first because these ideas can become incorporated into one’s ideology or way of seeing things. For example, after my Art History course I began to believe that all artists use lines, light and dark, and colour techniques to emphasize the central figures. Because these ideas were drilled by the course I began to feel as if they were natural, inevitable, and present in any work of art. Just as it was common sense to me that the central figure was St. John the Baptist, the techniques I related must have been there, or, were evident for me.

Furthermore, because of studying numerous works of Caravaggio in class, I was eager to identify his techniques and therefore expected much more of art. But did the artist really want to just relate a religious scene? Or did he simply want to relay a powerful effect by showing facial emotions and by placing the figures in such positions?

I feel that one can never understand that artist’s intent completely. The goal of interpretation may not necessarily be to discover the artist’s intentions but to establish new ideas of why it was created. Thus, as teachers we can not dictate ideas to students. It is up to them to come up with the ideas based on their own experiences and relation with the work. One should mentally take an art work from the context of a museum and put it back into images that dominate one’s daily life.



Caravaggio used dramatic chiaroscuro, or the use of light and dark to shift emphasis as well as using lines, groupings, and colour that lead the eye to the central figure.

“The teacher must not be a dictator but a catalyst”

Meaning is not entirely in the work or in the viewer but in the interrelation of the two. Who actually knows what the artist's original intent was? Each individual must make up their own mind and try to decide what the work of art means for themselves. I feel that bringing in one's personal experiences into interpretation is good as it creates a sense of unique connection with the work and enlivens it.

Although dealing with numerous interpretations alongside with your own may be confusing, one may begin to search for things and to see things which are not there in order to agree with other critics or one may become a critic by creating new meanings. Yet, this is where the greatness of art lies. Paintings seem silent because it is the viewer's task to reawaken a work and to give it life. That is why it is art. Great art allows one to think and to uncover its sometimes hidden message or maybe even the artist's thoughts. In this way one enters into conversation with the work and may discover the points that the artist desired to convey.

The viewer and the learner

This is the viewer's and learner's task. One is not called to stay stationary. One must use cognitive abilities. One is beckoned to think and to possibly contemplate the relationship between his life and a work of art while considering other interpretations. This ensues numerous fascinating questions that force the individual to contemplate. What is art if it does not allow us to think? It simply becomes a dull, lethargic picture that one can look up in an encyclopedia. As teachers we must be careful as to what we attempt to instill in students' minds. Students must make connections freely. Teachers should not enforce their interpretations down students' throats as seen in Paulo Freire's 'Banking' concept of education. The teacher must not be a dictator but a catalyst as defined in chemistry as 'a substance, usually present in small amounts relative to the reactants'. The goals of a lesson become the chemical reaction. The teacher 'modifies and especially increases the rate of a chemical reaction without being consumed in the process'. The teacher is the ringleader who should allow students to develop their own ideas and think critically. The students' ideas should be treasured the greatest.

Paulo Freire's words should echo in our minds:

'My parents introduced me to reading the word at a certain moment in this rich experience of understanding my immediate world. Deciphering the word flowed naturally from reading my particular world; it was not something superimposed on it. I learned to read and write on the grounds of the backyard of my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world rather than from the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard, the sticks my chalk.'

Notes for Contributors

Education 2000 is a magazine, published twice yearly (March/April and November/December periods), distributed free to all teachers, school administrators, student teachers and other educational practitioners who are interested in the study and development of the various areas of the school curriculum, teachers' professional development and school management. Its main objective is to facilitate the dissemination of research findings, effective practice and teaching and learning ideas. Each edition will have contributions related to education in the primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary sectors. We welcome the following kinds of contributions:

- Reports of research which has implications for the school/classroom situation. (A considerable amount of work in this regard is carried out in the form of dissertations for education degrees. Often this kind of work is shelved and forgotten. This journal will seek to assist in the publication of such work);
- Accounts of school/classroom curriculum-related activities and teaching ideas;
- Discussions of current issues in the teaching of the various curriculum areas and subjects at all ages.

Advice on suitable material in any area of the curriculum and help with the preparation of submissions will be given by the Editorial Board. Articles should not normally exceed 2,000 words. In fact shorter contributions are encouraged. Manuscripts and all bibliographical material should be set out in standard A.P.A. style. The Editorial Board reserves the right to make changes to manuscripts to be consonant with the scope and style of the publication.

ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL: Authors are encouraged to submit illustrative material with their articles. Such material (photographs, children's work, diagrams, etc.) should be in its original form rather than photocopies. Copyright permission, when required, is the responsibility of the author.

Contributions should be submitted:

- on 3.5" diskette, containing the original file of the submission (for example Word, Word Perfect, or Wordstar documents, etc), and a **text only** version. Both IBM compatible and Macintosh formatted diskettes are acceptable;
- a hard copy of the contribution, including detailed notification of the insertion points of illustrative material.
- all illustrative material in a separate envelope, but with the name of the author and contribution noted on it.

Contributions are to be submitted to *any* member of the Board, or sent to:

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