

Comparing the Aesthetic Responses of Expert and Non-Expert Viewers

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Abstract

The focus of this qualitative study was to gain insight into informants' attempts at understanding artworks by comparing the learning processes used by five expert and five non-expert volunteers while on a visit to a museum of fine arts. The research protocol yielded a data set for each informant comprising informant-made videos about two works of art, a transcript of a follow-up interview, and a history of the informant's art-related and museum-visiting experience. Analyses of this data revealed that the process of responding was the same for both the expert and non-expert informants in one major respect: the use of psychological operations to create meaning about the artworks was similar regardless of subset membership. Noticeable differences, however, were found in the content of those operations. Non-experts relied on their personal experience as the major source of content to fuel their encounters, whereas experts derived content mostly from disciplinary types of art-related knowledge. Finally, the author proposes that the provision of extended labels could bridge the gap in the viewing experiences of these two groups of museum visitors.

Abrégé

Afin d'étudier le processus sous-jacent à l'élaboration d'une réponse esthétique, nous nous sommes penchés sur les réactions de dix sujets - cinq experts et cinq non-experts - lors d'une visite au musée des beaux-arts. Ces séances de recherche ont donné lieu à la compilation d'un ensemble de données pour chaque sujet comprenant deux réponses esthétiques enregistrées sur bande vidéo, un relevé d'un entretien de suivi et une fiche de renseignements biographiques. L'analyse de ces données a démontré que les réponses des sujets experts et non-experts sont semblables en ce qui concerne les opérations psychologiques utilisées par les sujets pour comprendre et interpréter les oeuvres d'art. Néanmoins, des différences évidentes ont été identifiées en regard de la nature de l'information traitée par les sujets au moyen de ces opérations. Ainsi, les sujets non-experts font appel surtout à leur expérience vécue comme source de renseignements pour élaborer leurs réponses esthétiques, tandis que les experts ont davantage recours à leurs connaissances professionnelles dans le domaine de l'art. Enfin, l'auteur propose l'utilisation d'étiquettes allongées pour mieux répondre aux besoins des visiteurs de musées.

Introduction

Psychologists once used the term "apperception" to denote a process in which the organizing of sense data in relation to previous experience is especially extensive and systematic. This term is still useful in describing responses to art... All perception contains some amount of this, but in describing aesthetic experience it is especially important to notice the extent and order with which inner forms are built up more or less in compliance with the cues suggested by the outer form, the seen or heard work of art.... The apperception of art often involves some inference and reasoning, as in reading a detective story. In some types of art, such as religious symbolism, apperception involves understanding abstract ideas and theoretical relations. (Munro, 1956, p. 120)

According to the art scholar Thomas Munro, the formulation of an aesthetic response to a work of art requires that the viewer engage in a psychological process called "apperception." Via this process, the viewer is said to organize and interpret his or her percepts of the art object in reference to knowledge acquired through previous art-related or other life experiences. Although first proposed in 1956, Munro's conception of the art

viewing process still appears relevant, as empirical studies provide more evidence to support the idea that, through the aesthetic response process, the viewer engages actively in the construction of the meaning of the art object. We will return to this idea to comment further as the argument first sketched out here continues to unfold during the course of this paper. First, for the sake of clarity, let us begin by defining the terms of reference used in this paper.

Debate continues among researchers and theoreticians about definitions of *aesthetic experience*. This is, indeed, a difficult term to circumscribe. Current definitions have emerged from two different streams of thought. The first approach attempts to define aesthetic experience in terms of *the quality of a response* to an object or an event. From this point of view, it is the response, not necessarily the object or the event to which it refers, that is deemed to be aesthetic. Furthermore, the response is deemed to be aesthetic in nature only if it exhibits certain qualitative characteristics such as a "heightened state of consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, pp. 8-9). A second approach to defining *aesthetic experience* has emerged mainly from a need to provide a practical definition of the term for use in empirical studies of art viewers' aesthetic responses and aesthetic development. This point of view defines aesthetic experience simply as a *response to an aesthetic object*. Inherent in this second approach is the belief that definitions focusing on the quality of the response describe only *the ideal form* of the aesthetic encounter. Researchers who subscribe to this definition believe that in order to better understand aesthetic experience, they must study it, without prejudice, in all its forms, whether or not these closely approximate the ideal.

I have chosen to take this second approach in my attempt to delineate the term "aesthetic experience." I have opted for a simple, straightforward, operational definition; therefore, for the purposes of this study, the use of the term *aesthetic experience* will be used to refer to all viewers' responses to works of art. I agree with Abigail Housen (1983, p. 34) that an aesthetic experience consists of both an analytical and an affective response to a work of art and that these two facets of the experience cannot be easily separated without distorting the very nature of that experience. This point of view is shared by many researchers including Barbara Kaplan (1982), Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), and others. In this paper, I will use the term "aesthetic response" interchangeably with "art viewing process" whenever I wish to talk about the series of actions that any viewer initiates in order to understand and appreciate a work of art.

A Review of Aesthetic Response Theory

Some of the earliest conceptions of the mechanism of aesthetic response, such as Munro's (1956), as well as some of the more recent theories focus on the cognitive aspects of the art viewer's response. For example, Leonard Zusne (1986) proposes a descriptive model of aesthetic response based on a revised formulation of Festinger's (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. However, instead of Festinger's concept of "dissonance"

as the motivating factor in seeking renewed homeostasis once a conflict has taken place, Zusne proposes that a state of "cognitive consonance" - a form of pleasant, intrinsic motivation that "is sought for its own sake" - is the main factor inciting and rewarding aesthetic behavior (p. 531). He further proposes that "fittingness" is the mechanism via which aesthetic judgements are made: "The core of the aesthetic experience is the experience of some degree of fit between the specimen (the aesthetic object or event) and the corresponding standard. The degree of fit determines the intensity of the experience" (p. 531). Zusne also proposes a mechanism through which aesthetic development may occur: "The fact that the ideal standard is held only for the time being and that it is held by a given individual suggests the acquired nature of the standard and of the variations within an individual over time and among individuals" (p. 537).

A second paradigm, also essentially cognitive in scope, is proposed by John A. Codd (1982) to explain how aesthetic judgements are made. Codd argues that art appreciation is essentially a cognitive activity which involves interpretation of the aesthetic object or event using criteria that "are embedded in a normative language system and bounded by a logical structure" (p. 15). "Interpretive cognition," as Codd calls it, has three distinctive features. The first feature, "interpretive indeterminacy," relates to the fact that the aesthetic object itself can support a number of different interpretations. "Intentionality" is the second feature, and it pertains to the fact that aesthetic cognition is an activity that is engaged in at will; it is not an automatic response. It is, according to Codd, something that we can do, if we want to. Finally, the third and last feature of interpretive cognition is "imagination." The feature of imagination requires that we go beyond what is immediately apparent in the work of art. "Because works of art are complex symbolic objects, considerable understanding may be required to grasp their meaning.... It is important to recognize that imagination is required not only to create but also to interpret a work of art" (p. 23).

As in Codd's model, the role attributed to imagination stands out as a key construct in many theories of aesthetic response. Imagination is an important notion in many conceptualizations of aesthetic experience because it confers on the viewer an active role in the construction of his or her own understanding of the work of art. The viewer is not seen as a passive recipient of some message transmitted by the work of art; rather, he or she is understood as actively involved in a creative act that brings together perception, intellect, and emotion. Indeed, there has been considerable criticism of theories that attempt to portray aesthetic response solely as a cognitive process. In a review of early attempts to create a theory of aesthetic development, Barbara J. Kaplan (1982) emphasizes that a plausible theory will have to include both the cognitive and affective components of aesthetic experiencing: "Part of the aesthetic and creative experience seems to involve suspension of the distinctions and differentiations we have learned and to experience thinking with feeling" (p. 95).

More recently, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) have formulated an

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explanation of the aesthetic experience that addresses many of these concerns. By using anecdotal evidence obtained from a group of 52 museum professionals as the empirical basis for their study, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson hoped to examine the aesthetic encounter in its purest and optimal form. From this data they were able to identify the four major dimensions of aesthetic experience: intellect, communication, perception, and emotion. Each one of these dimensions constitutes, to some extent, a challenge that the work of art addresses to the viewer. She or he, in turn, will need to continuously perfect her or his skills within each of these four domains in order to continue to perform adequately in the task of aesthetic appreciation. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, the intellectual dimension of aesthetic experience consists of all aspects of the viewer's attempts to use knowledge in order to find meaning in the work of art. The communicative dimension of the aesthetic experience is characterized by the two modes by which an exchange is established via the work of art: the communication across different time periods and cultures, and the communication between individuals (the artist and the viewer). Perception is the third dimension of the aesthetic experience. It relates to the physical and formal qualities of a work of art and to the role that our senses play in defining it. Finally, the emotional dimension of aesthetic experience consists not only of the positive emotions engendered by the work of art, such as joy and inspiration, but also the negative ones, such as fear and frustration. For many of the informants in this study, the initial emotional response to a work of art is the triggering factor that actually incites the viewer to engage in the process of discovery that leads to the aesthetic appreciation of the art object (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, pp. 27-71).

Having identified the four dimensions of aesthetic experience, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson then propose a model that describes the aesthetic encounter in terms of an interaction between the viewer, the work of art, and the artist. To this encounter the viewer brings his or her skills in aesthetic appreciation; these may be more or less developed according to the viewer's training and previous viewing experience. The work of art also plays a role in the encounter as each work of art, with its specific characteristics, challenges anew the viewer's know-how according to the four dimensions identified above. In this model, the work of art is said to incorporate all its possible meanings including those "that transcend, in one way or another, the artist's intentions and the limitation and convention of his or her historical period that yet are open to interpretation and understanding by the beholder" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, p. 135). The last component in this triad consists of all the cognitive, communicative, perceptual, and emotional content imbued, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, by the artist into the work of art at the moment of its creation.

In this model, the quality of the aesthetic experience is said to relate directly to the viewer's ability to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the work of art according to the above four dimensions, and to the extent that the viewer's understanding concurs with the meaning vested in the work by the artist and, indirectly, by the other sociocultural factors that

also come into play in the construction of the meaning of a work of art. The degree of overlap among the viewer's skills, the art work's specificities, and the artist's intentions determines the extent and nature of the aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, pp. 133-137).

The theories described in this literature review are helpful in providing a framework for an initial understanding of the art viewing process. We find, however, that the models proposed by Zusne (1986), Codd (1982), and Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) provide only the most basic insight into whatever similarities or differences exist in the various art viewing strategies favoured and put into practice by different categories of viewers, such as novices, experts, and well-versed non-experts. The study described in this paper addresses this concern by examining and comparing in detail the art-viewing experiences of a group of expert and a group of non-expert viewers.

A Study of Expert and Non-Expert Viewers

Informants

In order to study expertise-related differences in art viewers' strategies for responding to works of art, we set out to examine the aesthetic responses of ten informants - five experts and five non-experts - who volunteered to share their insights about selected works of art while on a visit to a fine arts museum.

The selection of informants was guided by one criteria only: whether or not informants could be classified as either art experts or non-experts. Experts were defined as those informants who had professional university training in art and/or were involved in careers where such training (or a recognized equivalent) was an entry-level requirement. In turn, non-experts were defined as informants with university training in any discipline except the fine arts. The selection of informants for the study was limited to candidates with a university education in order to ensure that informants in both groups had somewhat equivalent levels of education. In all, five men and five women participated in the study; half were francophones and half were anglophones.

Method

The research procedure used in this qualitative study consisted of three different components. First, each informant completed a biographical questionnaire about his or her professional training and previous museum visiting experience. Then, using the "informant-made" ¹ data collection method, each informant produced video-taped accounts about his or her responses to two works of art of his or her own choice. Finally, after these tapes were completed, the researcher and the informant met to view and comment on the content of the informant's two videos.

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Materials

All data collection sessions were conducted at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario. For their participation in the study, the subjects chose two works of art from the objects on display in a series of five interconnected galleries devoted to the museum's permanent collections. These galleries were chosen as the site of the study because the works displayed within them represented a wide range of historical and contemporary styles and periods, as well as a variety of artistic media including painting, sculpture, and installation. Informants selected two works of art for use in the production of their video tapes based on the following criteria: the works had to be unknown, yet of interest, to the informant.

Instruments

The informants produced their video tapes using a SONY CCD-TR51 standard 8mm video camcorder. This instrument weighed 500 grams. It featured an automatic focusing system and an integrated stereo microphone, and it was powered by a battery that provided 55 minutes of operation time. All follow-up interviews were recorded using a SONY WM-D3 audio-cassette recorder.

Procedures

After completing the biographical questionnaire, each informant participated in a training session about the operation of the camcorder. Training included a few video taping exercises designed to assist the informant in learning how to use the video camera in an effective manner.

The data collection sessions were conducted as follows. Once an informant had selected a first work of art, he or she was asked to contemplate, in silence, the work in question for at least five minutes. The duration of this quiet viewing period was timed by the researcher. Once this initial period had passed, the informant was asked to begin the production of his or her first video tape. We asked the informant to produce a video tape, of approximately five minutes in duration, in which he or she communicates to the researcher the various steps undertaken in order to understand the work of art in question. In addition, we asked the informant to also talk about his or her understanding of the work of art. Finally, following the completion of the first video tape, the informant was asked to repeat this procedure with a different work of art in order to produce a second video tape.

The last component of the research protocol consisted of a follow-up interview during which the informant and the researcher viewed the two video tapes produced by the informant. During this final session, when necessary, the informant was able to clarify the comments he or she made in the video tapes. Likewise, the researcher was able to ask for

more information about any comments or images captured on tape that seemed incomplete or unclear.

Results

For each informant, the research sessions resulted in the production of a data set consisting of two separate video-tape responses to works of art, an audio-taped follow-up interview, and a completed biographical questionnaire.

A detailed analysis of the video-taped data was undertaken using a method of discourse analysis. For this purpose, we employed an instrument developed by Colette Dufresne-Tassé, Thérèse Lapointe, Carole Morelli, and Estelle Chamberland (1991) for the purpose of studying the experiences of adult museum visitors. Through a thorough examination of museum visitors' verbalizations, the instrument is able to identify various aspects of their psychological experience.

Use of the instrument consists of assigning identified units of speech, taken from the informant's statements about a specific object, to one of twelve independent and mutually exclusive categories. These categories represent the thought processes or "operations" that visitors use while viewing the object. The definition of the term "operation" used by Dufresne-Tassé et al. (1991, p. 285, as quoted from Piéron, 1963) is taken from Piaget: an operation is deemed to be "a reversible internalized action that is coordinated with others according to an overall structure" [author's translation]. The twelve operations identified by the instrument are: To Manifest; To Note or State; To Identify; To Recall; To Associate; To Compare; To Comprehend; To Justify or Explain; To Resolve, Modify, or Suggest; To Situate Oneself; To Verify; and, To Evaluate.

In addition to the coding of operations by category, another feature of the instrument permits the coding of each operation according to three different "domains" of experience: cognition, affect, or imagination.

A third feature of the instrument is that it can be used to identify evidence of the informant's "questions," "hypotheses," or "learning" about the work of art whenever these manifestations are found within a unit.

In the course of this study, two raters coded all of the transcripts used in the discourse analysis. Based on these codings, four types of comparative analyses were conducted. First, we compared the two groups' use of psychological operations during their aesthetic responses to the works of art. Second, we examined the orientation of these operations according to the three domains: affect, cognition, and imagination. Third, we compared the two groups for similarities and differences in regard to their learning and to their formulation of questions and hypotheses about the works of art. Fourth, we examined the function of the psychological operations used by the two groups.

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		Expert	Non-Expert	Difference
Operations	Manifest	5.2	5.6	- 0.4
	State	17.4	20.5	- 3.1
	Identify	10.4	10.6	- 0.2
	Recall	0.5	0.7	- 0.2
	Associate	5.8	5.6	0.2
	Compare	6.9	9.9	- 3.0
	Comprehend	21.5	16.3	5.2 *
	Explain	11.6	15.6	- 4.0
	Resolve	2.3	1.4	0.9
	Situate	11.0	4.2	6.8
	Verify	1.7	4.9	- 3.2
	Evaluate	5.2	4.9	0.3
Total **		99.5	100.2	
Domains	Affect	14.5	21.9	- 7.4 *
	Cognition	41.8	48.9	- 6.9 *
	Imagination	43.6	29.0	14.6 *
	Total	99.9	99.8	
Formulations	Learning	0.6	2.8	- 2.2
	Hypotheses	26.1	17.0	9.1 *
	Questions	2.9	5.6	- 2.7
	Total	29.6	25.5	
Total Operations		172	141	31

Table 1

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF INFORMANTS' STATEMENTS

Results in Table 1 are given in percentage of total operations.

* Only differences of 5% or more were considered significant.

** Percentages do not always add up to exactly 100% due to rounding off of the values.

Operations. Table 1 presents a compilation of the coding results obtained for the informants participating in this study; it facilitates a comparison of the findings for the two groups. Experts used the operation *To Situate* 6.8 percentage points more often and the operation *To Comprehend* 5.2 percentage points more often than the non-experts. The non-experts, in turn, made 4 percentage points more use of the operation *To Explain* and approximately 3 percentage points each more use of the operations *To Verify*, *To Compare*, and *To State*. It is difficult to assess the significance of these differences; however, in an attempt to put these differences in perspective, let us consider the fact that a 5 percent point difference represents, in fact, one operation out of twenty. A difference of this magnitude does not appear to be highly important, especially in consideration of the fact that most of the informants used a total of between 26 and 35 operations during their response to a work of art.

Domains. A more noticeable difference is revealed by a comparison of the percentage of total operations that fall within the different domains of psychological experience. The group of expert informants used imagination (43.6%) and cognition (41.8%) almost equally during their exploration of the works of art. They also favoured the use of these two domains by using them to a much larger extent (a total of 85.4% for the two) over the affective domain, which accounted for only 14.5% of their total operations. The pattern of use of the three domains of experience is different in the non-expert group. Cognition was the preferred domain of the non-expert group; it made use of cognitively oriented operations almost half of the time (48.9%). Imagination, the next most used domain, accounted for 29% of total operations, while affect accounted for 21.9% of total operations.

The most important difference between the two groups is the extent to which experts made more use of imagination in order to structure their experience: a noticeable difference of 14.6 percentage points. Other differences include the fact that non-experts used the affective domain 7.4 percentage points more often and that they also relied on cognition 6.9 percentage points more frequently than the experts in structuring their exploration and understanding of the works of arts.

Formulation of hypotheses. Finally, another noticeable difference between the two groups relates to the number of hypotheses generated by the informants during their investigation of the works of art. The expert informants formulated 9.1 percentage points more hypotheses about the meaning of the works of art than did the non-experts.; however, this is not to say that the non-experts did not emit hypotheses about the works being viewed, because they did so to a noticeable extent, as well. Seventeen percent of their total operations were formulated as hypotheses; nonetheless, the experts surpassed them in this regard.

Functions of the operations. Another feature of the discourse analysis instrument is that the operations may be grouped according to one of *four specific functions*, since it has been demonstrated that the museum visitor tends to selectively use the various operations in keeping with the changing objectives of his or her investigation of a museum

		Expert	Non-Expert	Difference
Function	Related Operations	Percentage of Total Operations		
Perceive and become acquainted with the work of art	<i>Manifest</i> <i>State</i> <i>Identify</i>	33	37	- 4
Construct meaning on what has been perceived	<i>Recall</i> <i>Associate</i> <i>Compare</i> <i>Explain</i> <i>Comprehend</i>	47	48	- 1
Control for accuracy	<i>Verify</i> <i>Evaluate</i> <i>Situate</i>	18	14	4
Perfect what has been constructed	<i>Resolve</i>	2	1	1
TOTAL		100	100	

Table 2

FUNCTION OF THE OPERATIONS

Each function of the operations in Table 2 is given in percentage of total operations.

object.

By grouping the results of the discourse analysis according to these four functions, we are able to continue the comparison of the experts' and non-experts' use of operations in the production of their video tapes. Table 2 presents the results of the comparison. The results of the grouping of operations is striking. It becomes obvious that the difference between the two groups, in terms of their use of operations according to function, is negligible. In regards to the first function, non-experts used only 4 percentage points more operations than the experts when initially becoming acquainted with the works of arts. When this difference is standardized by multiplying the average number of operations for the expert informants (34.4) by a factor of .04, this works out to about 1.4 additional operations for each non-expert informant. As pertains to the second function, both groups used almost the same percentage of operations in attempting to construct meaning on what they had perceived about the works of art: the difference here is only 1 percentage point. For the third function, "to control for accuracy," informants in the expert group used 4 percentage points more operations. Again, this works out to an average of only 1.38 additional operations for the expert informants, when the average total of expert operations (34.4) is multiplied by .04. Finally, both groups used fourth function operations very sparingly, and the difference between the two group is only one percentage point.

Discussion

In this section of the paper, we will discuss the outcomes of the analyses of the informants' use of operations, their function, and the psychological domains from which these operations originate. The three operations used most often by the non-expert informants, in order of frequency, were: *To State*, *To Comprehend*, and *To Explain*. For the expert informants, the three most used operations are the same, but the order is slightly different: *To Comprehend*, *To State*, and *To Explain* (see Table 1). When the frequency of use of each operation is transposed according to function, it becomes obvious that the differences in the results of the discourse analysis between the two groups are very slight indeed. There is only a difference of one percentage point in the number of operations used by both groups in order to construct meaning regarding the works of art. Furthermore, there are only minor variations in the percentages of operations that both groups devoted to the other three functions. Non-expert informants used slightly more operations allocated to the function of perceiving the work of art. Experts utilized slightly more operations than non-experts in order to control the accuracy of their emerging ideas about the works of art and just a few more operations in perfecting these ideas. In sum, there is no noticeable difference in the two groups' use of operations.

If the differences between both groups' use of psychological operations are negligible (as it appears they are), is it because both groups are alike, or is it because the two groups are different in other respects? Indeed, it is when we begin to examine the

domains of the operations used by both groups that a difference begins to emerge (see Table 1). Non-expert informants clearly preferred to approach the work of art from a cognitive point of view: most of their operations were formulated with such a stance. The remainder of their operations were almost equally divided between constructions that were either imaginative or affective in orientation. Expert informants, on the other hand, preferred to approach the investigation of the works of art by alternating, almost to an equal extent, between operations that had an imaginative construction and those that had a cognitive construction. A very small percentage of their total operations were actually affective in orientation. When the percentages for the two groups are compared, a noticeable difference emerges in the percentage of operations originating within the domain of imagination. Experts formulated 14.6 percentage points more operations with an imaginative construction than the non-experts did.

Another important difference between the two groups relates to the total number of operations that were formulated as hypotheses about the works of art. Once again, in this respect, the experts supersede the non-experts by formulating more hypotheses about the meaning of the works before them.

I believe that these two differences in the performance of the experts are related. To generate an hypothesis about a work of art, one has to use the imagination to "see" beyond what is presently known about the work and, in the process of doing that, formulate a supposition about what is, or might be, its meaning.

Dufresne-Tassé and Lefebvre (1995) define imagination as a subset of cognition. They see the application of imagination, in the exploration of an idea, as an extension of one aspect of the overall function of cognition:

The domain of imagination is a sub-category of cognition. It's where images are recreated or constructed... The exploration of an idea by resorting to the use of imagination is in fact a way of furthering an aspect of cognitive functioning. The importance afforded to imagination stems from its contribution to the creative performance of the visitor, given that the museum offers a [learning] situation that favors a process of discovery. (pp. 34-35) (author's translation)

Since imagination can be understood to be a subset of cognition, the expert informant's preference for using imagination and cognition almost equally takes on new meaning. We can now see the expert's art understanding process under a new light: it is a process where 85% of the activity is conducted under the auspices of cognition. It is a process where the continuity in thought processes is only seldomly interrupted by occasional forays into the affective domain.

This new information, however, reveals another dimension of the art understanding process of the non-expert informant participating in this study. For this informant, affect plays a much greater role in forming his or her aesthetic understanding of works of art. Twenty-two percent of the non-experts' art understanding operations were

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formulated with an affective orientation. Overall, this means that the flow of cognitive and imaginative operations is interrupted more often, about once in every four operations, so that affect can play a greater role in informing the non-expert's interpretive process.

When we view the various informant-made video tapes, we do indeed get a sense that these differences exist. Even though the informants use the same operations in exploring the works of art, the content of these operations differs somewhat between experts and non-experts. Overall, non-experts take a more subjective approach in their videos: they talk more about themselves and more about their own personal reactions to the works of art. Personal experience, it seems, may be the source of the affect-laden operations. Experts, on the other hand, try to be more objective: their overall stance is more intellectual, and they try to relate the work of art to their understanding of art world concepts and theories.

Conclusions

The discourse analysis of the research data has led us to conclude that two groups of informants participating in this study used essentially the same psychological operations and the same formal process in their attempts to interpret the works of art. Differences were identified, however, in terms of the content of the interpretations formulated by each group. Expert informants made greater use of disciplinary knowledge in formulating their ideas about the art objects, while the non-expert participants relied, to a far greater extent, on their personal experiences as a source of knowledge to inform their readings of the works of art. Furthermore, as evidenced in the informants' recorded statements, the expert informants were somewhat more creative in their attempts to understand these objects; as a group, they used imagination to a greater extent during this process than the non-experts. We also found a noticeable difference in the greater number of hypotheses about the works of art formulated by the expert informants. In sum, all of these findings appear related, since the use of imagination is essential to the formulation of hypotheses about the meaning of art objects.

These findings confirm what we reported earlier in the literature review: imagination is an essential and pivotal component of an aesthetic response. Through his or her use of imagination, the viewer engages in a creative reconstruction of the meaning of the work of art. This, then, would seem to be the central core of the aesthetic experience. Imagination may also be the feature that distinguishes the concept of "apperception," as proposed by Thomas Munro as an explanation of the art viewing process, from other, more common, forms of perception. The terms used by Munro (1956, p. 120) in his description of apperception, such as "inference," "reasoning," and "reading" seem to refer to such a construct.

Finally, these findings bring us to wonder about the ways in which we could assist museum visitors, especially non-expert viewers, in their attempts to understand and appreciate works of art in a museum setting. It is worth noting that when this study was

These findings confirm what we reported earlier in the literature review: imagination is an essential and pivotal component of an aesthetic response.

conducted, only one out of the thirty-seven works of art considered by the study's informants was accompanied by an extended label presenting some information about the work of art in question. In this one case, the informant did make extensive use of the contextual information provided by the art gallery. This leads us to pose the following question. If pertinent and useful information about the works of art is made more readily accessible to museum visitors - for example, in the form of extended labels - would visitors make good use of this information? Would non-expert viewers substitute readily available art-related types of information for the more personal types of information they use when art-related information is not accessible? Or, would they simply continue to refer to their personal experience as the preferred means for interpreting the works of art? Finally, would the availability of appropriate information encourage non-expert visitors to be more imaginative in their responses to the works of art, thus helping to bridge the gap between the aesthetic experience of expert and non-expert viewers? These are some of the many, interesting questions that have arisen as a result of this study. These questions have become the focus of our ongoing research.

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Note

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