

Art is Us: Class #2

Dick started off Class #2 with a question: “Does anyone know what the word ‘heuristic’ means?” He explained that the title of his thesis for his Masters of Education was *The Heuristics of Problem-Solving*, which he re-phrased as “a conscious knowledge of the process by which you arrive at your conclusions”. Dick stressed that his goal for the series is teach us to think on our own, stating, “What is the conclusion for this class? To create independent thinkers.”

heuristic: heu-ris-tic (hyo-ristik/) *adjective*

1. Enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves.
"a “hands-on” or interactive heuristic approach to learning"

One way he hopes to achieve this is by giving us a series of exercises and games, spread out over the length of the course, that are designed to bring awareness to our own thought processes. He emphasized again how important it is to go beyond “Do I like it or not”, and really learn to LOOK at what the artist was trying to achieve.

And he went back to the one of his core messages for this course: to learn to separate the *is* from the *ought*; that is, *fact* from *opinion* or *judgment*; the *objective* from *subjective*.

Dick repeated that the first two questions you should always ask yourself when looking at an art piece (or architecture, or listening to music, etc.): 1) What was the artist trying to do, and 2) did they do it? Figure out what intentions the artist was trying to fulfill, and then ask if they were successful in meeting those. All other considerations are going to be subjective, and lead to more “*oughts*”. As Dick said, “Don’t judge someone on something they are not trying to do.”

In the game for Class #2, we were again given a set of images, with the instructions: “Identify the five tribes, consisting of three art periods each.” Dick added that these exercises were not meant to be easy, and that if they provoke some anxiety or frustration, they were working. He wants to expose us to some anxiety because “that’s where the real learning takes place”: if you are not feeling nervous, you are not stepping outside of your comfort zone.

This game proved his point, and seemed to be even more challenging than the first one. Many students made comments about not knowing what to look for, or how to group the “tribes”. Which turned out to be the lesson at the bottom of it all, that we have to acknowledge the presence of AMBIGUITY, or as Dick said, we have to acknowledge that the evidence can be “tricky”. Knowing this, there are many correct answers, and they can all be legitimate. To which one participant said, “You’re confusing me!” and Dick replied, “Well, I’m trying to!” He then stressed the importance of acknowledging that *there will be ambiguities in art and art history*, and that is the result of it being a *human* endeavor.

Dick continued, “There are many ways to group things, but what you are looking for are the similarities that form the base of the issue.” In other words, what is important to that culture or “tribe”? And what is the evidence to support that? Learn to use your powers of OBSERVATION. There will be many ways of *seeing* and *understanding* that differ from culture to culture, so do not rely on your assumptions to always make sense of the world.

SLIDE LECTURE:

We started our slide lecture by reviewing some of the garden images that had been taken by students over the previous week. The assignment was to find gardens that illustrate a rational (“formal or geometric”) design versus a natural (“casual or intuitive”) design. And as if to illustrate Dick’s lesson from the game, the first thing that came up in the discussion was a difference of opinion: one person saw the garden as a formal design, whereas another viewed it as an intuitive design. Dick went back to his point about *interpretation*, and how easy it is for us to automatically judge things from very different perspectives. How do we interpret a garden that has clear lines and paved walkways, yet those lines are also curved and more “organic” in shape?

Another person had taken photos of landscaping at a restaurant, which she was using to illustrate an intuitive or “casual” design, and yet again, someone else had a different perspective and said that she found it ironic to show a commercial garden as a “natural” example. How do you interpret a setting where every rock and plant is placed quite deliberately and carefully, yet in a style that suggests it was designed to have a casual result? Dick pointed out again, how does this discussion illustrate our own ambiguities or our “givens” when looking at art?

Dick said we could continue to look at garden examples throughout the course, as it can quickly bring to light our own unique biases. Dick likes using these photos of garden design: “The idea of looking for opportunities in your own neighborhood, for example: what does this tell you about the owner of this garden?” By going beyond our own preferences, and learning to ask what the design says about the *creator* of the garden, we can begin to look at art in the same way.

The Transition: A New View of Man and His Place in the World

We started the slide lecture with two images of a similar design, but from differing periods of Greek history. In graduate school, Dick and his classmates would be tested on their knowledge of art history by being given two slide images of work, and asked to write an essay detailing the period and style of each piece.

Dick began by saying, “One of the things we are going to concentrate on is learning to make a comparative analysis ... if you had these two images (Slide #1), and you were asked to write an essay, what would you say? And notice how you talk about the work: don’t assume that anyone knows a damn thing about what you are talking about.” In other words, watch out for your “givens”, and how those can get in the way of a true observation.

Dick pointed out that the way to really examine art history is to make comparative analyses, but to do it with some common ground: “First of all, I always ask, ‘Why did they pick these two?’ The very first thing we should do is IDENTIFY it: we are looking at two different Greek vases, and we are looking at two different periods in Greek history, and you could say that one on the left is Archaic and the one on the right is Classic: all this is doing is *identifying*.” He pointed out that it would be “silly” to compare a Baroque landscape with a Renaissance portrait, because they would have very little in common from which to compare.

He then broke the process down: “There are only three steps that we are going to be concerned with: 1) If you know it, identify it. 2) Once we’ve identified this, then make a general statement. 3) Now prove your point, using supportive statements to back up your observations.”

The difficulty in this analysis is learning to separate our biases from the evidence, and Dick summed it up as, “The only thing I’m trying to get you to recognize is when you are going into *speculation*, versus when you are linking it directly to what you can *see*.”

He then continued: “We are all entitled to our own feelings and perspectives - what we bring to it - because that’s who we are too. But what I’m suggesting here is that when we recognize that there is a philosophical change, it will cover all of the culture/tribe’s world-view.” In this case we see how the Greek philosophy went from one of man being dominated by natural forces (“I had nothing to do with this, that raging storm did it all”), to one of man being at the center of things and being able to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions (“I’m a tragic figure, because I made the decision, and look what happened”).

Dick stressed that this was part of the change that we would continue to see evidence of as we continued through the timeline of Greek art periods. The next few slides showed sculptural representations of humans, going from the *kuoros* figures contained in their “Arrested Walk” (which shows a rather stylized human figure, whose form and design is dominated by the rectangular frame of what once was a block of stone); to *the Discus Thrower* and *the Charioteer*, now freed from only being in the vertical axis and starting to reach out into a horizontal plane. Part of this transition is due to the change in materials: going from carving and chiseling out a form from a block of stone (a reductive process), to the creation of forms built first with clay or wax then cast in bronze (an additive process). This material change allowed for arms outstretched, twisting torsos, and the feeling of more dynamic and “real” human movement.

As the class looked at the statue of *Zeus-Poseidon*, Dick emphasized the lines of the vertical and horizontal axis, and how this is a metaphor for the Greek mind-set, as they are also reaching out to new horizons and finding new philosophical freedoms: “And to me, what is so exciting about this, is that this is what is happening to their mind also: they’re moving out. There’s more freedom, there’s more understanding of ‘I am man, and I will compete with Nature.’ Not be dominated by Nature, but compete.”

The mental attributes of the Classic Greek period are also found in their choice of physical attributes: “This is the Ideal: this isn’t Man as he really *is*, this is Man as we’d like him to be. The proper age (we don’t see any old age), we also don’t see any expression of torture or concern – absolutely free of all human concern. Just this beautiful countenance, this flawless body, with no flab ... These are real muscles, not just little inscribes, these are actually taken from life; so it’s very true to life, but idealized: *perfect*, the world as we would like it to be.”

He brought it back to the garden images: “What I want you to realize is that there are people in this room who are of this same mind: I will go out and I will trim my hedges and my garden, and I will conform it to my rational being, so that when you look at my garden you say, ‘This has been attended to by a human being.’ Now take in contrast to that, if you’re more of a Naturalist or a Romantic, then you will have the English gardens, the Japanese gardens: they don’t want it to look like it’s been framed by man. And so if you are of the Greek Classic mind, Man is at the center: all else will be a reflection of that, of imposing my values on the natural force. There will be those artists who firmly believe that you do not show in your art the world as it really is, but rather the world as it should be: the Greek Classic.”

We moved on the Hellenistic period: “Here you’ll see something you’ll never see with the Classic. So if you’re sorting out your tribes, why is this not of the Classic period? 1) We never saw old age in the Classic. What else? The old boxer, beat to a pulp; the old woman, maybe a street scene ... This is the world *as it is*, not as we would *like it to be*. But look at the bodies now: it’s not held in a vertical shaft, or even in a vertical and horizontal shaft, but in a full 3-dimensional round. Even the old woman is moving into a space in this way [forward] and not just this way [vertical], but taking another step in the evolution of sculpture. This is the world as it really is. And so within the Archaic, to the Classic, to the Hellenistic, you will see the repeat of this through the whole history of art.”

To finish the lecture, Dick said again that he hopes to help his students become conscious of their own thought processes. “Education is a matter of knowing your choices – if you don’t know your choices, you are a victim. Look at all the options you have. An adult assumes responsibility for their choices, but they are more aware of their options. A child is more convinced and sure of their reasoning, but they are not aware of all the options.”