

STUDIES IN ART EDUCATION INVITED LECTURE

The Studies in Art Education Invited Lecture is presented at the annual meeting of the National Art Education Association. Each year the presenter is elected by the Studies in Art Education Editorial Board as a leading scholar in art education. In 2008, the lecture was presented by Renee Sandell, Professor and Director of Graduate Art Education Programs at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Dr. Sandell's research and teaching focuses on visual literacy; gender concerns and multicultural issues in art education; studio pedagogy; art and healing; museum education; technology and learning; and the professional development of teachers.

Doug Blandy, Senior Editor

Using Form+Theme+Context (FTC) for Rebalancing 21st-Century Art Education

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This article addresses the need to rebalance 21st-century art education for inclusion and integration leading to fuller art engagement in an increasingly visual world. I expand upon the form versus content canon in art and offset the typically predominant use of sensory, formal, or technical qualities in comprehending meaning from, as well as in creating, works of art. This article proposes the utility of Form+Theme+Context (FTC) as a practical alternative for understanding as well as creating visual imagery. An FTC Palette for Decoding and Encoding Art is presented as a balanced and accessible approach to meaningfully creating and responding to art and artifacts. Careful examination of a painting by Ben Shahn demonstrates the FTC approach, designed to engage viewers in significantly discerning the artist's visual and written ideas while seeking relationships and relevance to contemporary art and life. Moving towards an inclusive, pragmatic theory of balanced integration, connections of FTC to the profession are linked to art theory and educational practice.

For students living in a rapidly changing world, the arts teach vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking. If our primary demand of students is that they recall established facts, the children we educate today will find themselves ill-equipped to deal with problems like global warming, terrorism, and pandemics.... Those who have learned the lessons of the arts, however - how to see new patterns, how to learn from mistakes, and how to envision solutions - are the ones likely to come up with the novel answers needed most for the future. (Winner and Hetland, 2007)

Author's Note

Deeply moved by this major honor and recognition, I am grateful to Kevin Tavin (a former student) for nominating me, along with Doug Blandy and the *Studies in Art Education* Editorial Board as well as Davis Publications, Inc. for sponsoring this event. I am indebted to so many of my treasured colleagues including those unable to attend, especially Georgia Collins. I'd also like to recognize the support and inspiration of my George Mason University students and faculty as well as family

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The Compelling Need for Visual Literacy in The 21st Century

and friends. Challenged by the task of translating my interactive “lecture” into a written paper, sincere appreciation is extended to Drs. Carole Henry, Jacqueline Kibbey, and Katherine Schwartz for comments on the pre-publication draft.

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Adjusting to the 21st century has challenged artists and art educators to explore our increasingly visual world critically and with fresh eyes (Gude, 2004; 2007). From preschool to post-graduate level, all learners increasingly need 21st-century skills that rely on multiple forms of literacy, including visual literacy, which is to images what reading and writing are to words (Burmark, 2002). While Jensen estimated in 2001 that we receive over 90% of our information visually, our contemporary culture has rapidly become all the more dependent on the human capacity to visually communicate instantly and universally (Metros, 2008).

Today’s students require capabilities that enable them to encode visual concepts through creating art and to decode meaning by responding to society’s images, ideas, and media which permeate our increasingly complex visual world (Sandell, 2003). All educators are confronted with “how to prepare youngsters so that they can survive and thrive in a world different from one ever known or even imagined before” (Gardner, 2006, p. 17). In this vein, students will need to master new cognitive abilities leading to a cultivated mind that is disciplined, able to synthesize, be creative, respectful, and ethical, along with the capacity to integrate ideas from different disciplines and an appreciation for those differences.

Despite how highly visual our world is, for many, art remains a mystery—people do not know how to dissect its meaning and “own” it purposefully in their lives. As Daniel Pink (2005) pointed out, “If a picture is worth a thousand words, a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures” (p. 50). To develop a whole new mind demanded by the new century, Pink indicates that today’s learners will need to use six new senses: **design** (increasing the visual appeal and organization of things), **story** (communicating effectively through compelling narrative), **symphony** (synthesizing ideas, seeing the big picture and how the pieces fit together), **empathy** (seeing the world as others see it), **play** (creatively engaging in problem solving and inventive thinking), and **meaning** (uncovering, finding a sense of purpose, and making informed choices towards higher-order thinking skills and transformation). Art teachers have been the agents who provide access to the meaning of art as a language and thus will be instrumental in developing visual literacy, that is, “*the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and [21st century] media in ways that advance understanding, thinking, decision making, communication, and learning* [my emphasis].”¹

In developing visually literate citizens, today’s art teachers are responsible for engaging learners with art, in its myriad forms, ideas, and purposes, as a qualitative language that, like poetry, explores *how*, in contrast to *what* something is, through meaningfully making and responding to images. Through the *informative* process of **critical response**, art learners perceive, interpret, and finally judge ideas connected to visual imagery and structures, past and present. Through the *transformative* process of **creative expression**, art learners generate artistic ideas that can be elaborated, refined, and finally shaped into mean-

¹This definition, originally included on the 2008 NAEA bookmark stating, “Art teachers nurture six senses in developing visual literacy...”, can now be found on <http://distance-ed.math.tamu.edu/techttools/valgebra/resources/definitions.html>

ingful visual images and structures. According to Bill Ivey (U.S. Department of Education and National Endowment for the Arts, 2000), Former Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, “With the pervasiveness of media in the lives of our young people, it becomes ever more imperative that they are able to interpret the messages they receive. If our children don’t learn to shape images, images will shape them.”

Informed by research on studio thinking (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007), quality student engagement in visual art occurs through pedagogy within three studio structures: Demonstration-Lectures, Students-at-Work, and Critique. As the authors assert, the real benefits of visual art education direct us to cultivate eight studio habits of mind that help individuals learn: develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, and understand the art world. Beyond their connection to making or responding to art, these habits of mind are highly useful to cognitive and multiple other forms of thinking necessary for fully functioning in the 21st century.

A New Tool for Balanced Visual Literacy in Art Education

In embracing today’s standards for teaching studio art and art history in the context of contemporary visual culture, we need to help learners more fully understand art images, objects, and events, present and past, building a sense of relevance and significance in their lives. Utilizing a balanced approach that attends equally to the **form**, **theme**, and **context(s)** of an artwork can help learners create as well as discern layers of meaning in visual language, as revealed in the following equation: **Art = Form + Theme + Context** (Sandell, 2006). As we explore **form**, or *how the work “is,”* we scrutinize the artist’s many structural decisions embedded in the creative process that leads to a final product. As we examine **theme**, or *what the work is about*, we discern what the artist expresses through a selected overarching concept that addresses the Big or Enduring Idea (Walker, 2001; Stewart & Walker, 2005) along with relationships that reveal the artist’s expressive viewpoint connecting art to life. As we investigate **context(s)**, or *when, where, by/for whom and why the art was created (and valued)*, we comprehend the authentic nature of the artwork by probing the conditions for and under which the art was created and valued as well as by considering the work under conditions from our perspectives in contemporary, foreign, or older cultures.

By distinguishing how the form and theme work together within specific contexts, we can comprehend art’s relevance and significance for the creator within his/her culture or society, which can lead to greater understanding and appreciation by the contemporary viewer (Sandell, 2005). FTC enlarges the canonical “form versus content” dichotomy in art, where revered mainstream artworks in museum settings, along with hiddenstream artifacts such as African masks and women’s quilts hung on walls distinct from their original purposes, often have been presented out-of-context. With contextual information, visual learners can perceive the intention and purpose of an artwork by identifying personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, spiritual, and other contexts that influence the creation and understanding of the work.

²Used by Summer 2008 participants in the High School Internship Program to research two art objects at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. (Personal Email Correspondence. 2008, August 5. Museum Educator Aimee Dixon, High School Internship Coordinator, Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

³FTC can be flexibly used to decode any work of art, from any period in art history to the present. The selection of Ben Shahn's *Spring for the Studies in Art Education* lecture was made based on the timing of my presentation at the 2008 annual convention (spring season, political climate in Katrina-ravaged New Orleans, and NAEA's 60th anniversary) as well as to highlight an artist whose political work and writings have influenced the field of art education while addressing aesthetic issues of Abstraction versus Realism in his time that have relevance today.

⁴In the written discussion of formal, thematic, and contextual qualities of Shahn's *Spring* that follows, please note

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The construct of Form+Theme+Context helps organize and balance perception and is a tool that may be used by the novice as well as the experienced viewer. It also makes the case for rebalancing our overly formalist approach to art pedagogy by helping all learners become more fully engaged with meaning in creating and understanding art. Rather than reactively reject the "infamous" elements of art and principles of design, we might proactively embrace a metaphorically bigger picture of art by balancing Form + Theme + Context. Along with physics, psychology, and other fields, as our world gets more visually and otherwise complex, there is an increasing need for simplicity and clarity of our field and its purposes in society. Despite the unlikelihood of a unifying theory in art education, FTC is a way of looking at art and how we teach. It can serve as a tool to create engagement and understanding of art and other subjects. FTC is a theory for navigating phenomena for meaning and can be applied to other fields as a catalyst for fully perceiving what is present and allow us to draw our own conclusions—owning meaning in terms of its significance and relevance. For example, physicians might utilize this tool to improve diagnosing medical illness and developing treatment plans: balancing observed evidence as a result of a patient's physical exam and test results, a patient's expressed narrative and related connections, and significant contextual factors such as health history as well as hereditary, environmental, spiritual, and other dimensions.

Introduced in my January 2006 article in *Art Education*, I proposed a visual organizer entitled "Form + Theme + Context: An Art Teacher's Palette for Composing Meaningful Lessons" designed to help art educators balance considerations for creating meaningful art lessons. Using this instrument with a wide range of art students in classrooms and museums² as well as preservice and inservice art teachers, I have since adapted the FTC Palette for use by anyone interested in decoding (interpreting) or encoding (creating) a work of art. FTC helps viewers actually visualize their thinking process from which to draw open-ended and personally authentic conclusions, enabling each individual to find and own meaning in an artwork that has significance and relevance.

Designed to activate thinking by generating and "mixing" information, the FTC Palette is a visual organizer that builds understanding, makes connections, and inspires deeper inquiry and creativity. To demonstrate the use of the FTC Palette in decoding a specific work of art, we can collaboratively examine Ben Shahn's painting entitled *Spring*.³ In discovering visual evidence through **formal** qualities, exploring relationships embedded in **thematic** qualities, and discerning significance and relevance rooted in **contextual** qualities, our inquiry will be guided by the question: *How does a BALANCE of formal, thematic, and contextual qualities reveal its LAYERS of meaning?*⁴

Discovering Visual Evidence Through Formal Qualities

By using the FTC Palette to explore the **formal** qualities of Ben Shahn's *Spring*, a viewer might discover the following⁵: The painting's composition is asymmetrical and horizontal. Prominent art elements include the use of solid shapes, broken (body) forms, primary colors, linear fences, folds, and diverse textures. These art elements are characterized by the utilization of design principles:

Form + Theme + Context
FTC Palette for Decoding and Encoding Visual Art

ART =	FORM	+	THEME	+	CONTEXT
	<i>How the work "is"</i>		<i>What the work is about</i>		<i>When, Where, By/For Whom, and WHY the work was created (and valued)</i>

Title: _____

How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual aspects reveal layers of meaning?

FORMAL	+ THEMATIC +	CONTEXTUAL
<p>Actual Composition:</p> <p>Art Elements:</p> <p>Design Principles:</p> <p>2D&3D Qualities:</p> <p>Size/Scale:</p> <p>Media/ Materials:</p> <p>Processes/Methods:</p> <p>Skills:</p> <p>Style:</p> <p>Other:</p>	<p>Broad Subject/BIG IDEA:</p> <p>Subject Matter:</p> <p>Point of View:</p> <p>Visual Sources:</p> <p>Art Historical References:</p> <p>Literary Sources:</p> <p>Other Arts Connections: ☞ Music ☞ Theater ☞ Dance ☞ Film & New Media</p> <p>Other Subject Areas: ⇒ Math ⇒ Language Arts ⇒ Science ⇒ Social Studies ⇒ Physical Education ⇒ Vocational Education</p>	<p>WHEN:</p> <p>WHERE:</p> <p>BY/FOR WHOM:</p> <p>WHY: Intention/Purpose(s):</p> <p>Significance/Relevance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Personal ◆ Social ◆ Cultural ◆ Historical ◆ Artistic ◆ Educational ◆ Political ◆ Spiritual ◆ Other

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Figure 1. Form+Theme+Context: FTC Palette for Decoding and Encoding Visual Art.
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Figure 2. Shahn, Ben. (1947). *Spring*. Tempera on Masonite. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

that PowerPoint slides containing multiple animated art and photographic images were presented during a highly interactive discussion on March 28, 2008 at the NAEA 60th Annual Convention in New Orleans.

⁵ The exploratory process of decoding formal, thematic, and contextual qualities in a work of art is richer and unique when done interactively with an audience, building on the specific group's knowledge and experience.

To more fully perceive the formal qualities of *Spring*, a color version may be found at <http://www.tfaoi.com/mn/mib/mib12.jpg>

asymmetry, dominance (woman in a red dress), foreshortening (male figure in blue), exaggeration (hands), distortion (bodies), juxtaposition, repetition, contrast, patterns, rhythm, positive/negative space, unity, and variety. The size and placement of figures, along with the depth created by converging lines in two-dimensional painting provides an illusion of contained three-dimensional space. Careful study of cropped sections of the painting, such as the heads (as well as hand gestures and body details) of the two reclining large figures, the red thistle plant, a tiny pair of figures jumping rope as well as linear fences and large empty spaces on the right, contributes to how our eyes move around the composition. Approximately 17 x 30 inches, *Spring* was created using tempera paint on masonite board. The painting exposes the artistic processes/methods of visual composing, along with the use of diverse painting applications including scumbling. Revealing Shahn's proficiency in drawing and painting, the work echoes the artist's unique narrative style as an Abstract/Social Realist. The composition reflects Shahn's skills and experience as a photographer, muralist, and painter who worked in series.

Exploring Relationships Embedded in Thematic Qualities

Using the title *Spring* as a cue to the **thematic** qualities, Ben Shahn's painting addresses the big idea of spring—literally as a season as well as a metaphor. The subject matter of Shahn's depicted spring includes a cityscape (a type of landscape) and genre scene containing two pairs of figures. The fact that we see two contrasting couples, containing paired figures in close proximity, the enduring idea may be expanded to the nature of human relationships in and over time as well as the quality of human connection and conflict. With the dramatic scale and "in your face" point of view of the dominating couple, one might ask: What is the mood of *Spring* in the United States, in post-war 1947 (when the

image was painted)? The painting's visual sources include exaggerated forms and unusual poses of the woman (lateral sphinx, lioness) and foreshortened African-American man, triple bloom thistles held in the woman's hand, distant "youthful" figures jumping rope, and the fenced in pathways that "contain" the dominant, bi-racial couple. The artist's expressive choice of elements and principles creates a unique composition that is compelling and unsettling.

The complex theme of spring as an element of human experience can be explored further in terms of art history, referring to masterpieces such as Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (1477-78) or Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte* (1884-1886). Comparisons can also be made with American artists who painted New York park scenes such as Ernest Lawson, *Model Sailboat Pond, Central Park, New York* (1904-7), Maurice Prendergast's *May Day, Central Park* (1901) or William Zorach's *Spring in Central Park* (1914). Furthermore, we can look at Shahn's contemporaries who explored the spring theme in his time such as Louise Bourgeois' 1949 painted balsa sculpture *Spring*, Charles E. Burchfield's 1954 watercolor *Oncoming Spring*, or even Andrew Wyeth's 1948 *Christina's World*, also painted in tempera on panel with its massive grassy ground, enveloping the awkwardly-posed reclining female protagonist.

Spring's theme can be further explored through a study of love relationships and conflicts evident in other art forms as well as non-art disciplines (Lahr & Tabori, 1982). For example, literary sources might range from the Bible story of *Adam and Eve* to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *How Do I Love Thee?* Other arts connections could include Music (from Stravinsky's 1913 ballet score *Rites of Spring*, with its asymmetrical rhythms, and Vivaldi's *Spring* from *The Four Seasons*, to folk ballads and popular songs by the Beatles and Motown); Theater (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Tennessee William's *Street Car Named Desire*, Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, Sondheim and Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George*); Dance (diverse cultural forms of artistic movement plus Martha Graham's 1944 choreography of *Appalachian Spring* (for which Aaron Copeland received the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for the ballet score); and Film (*Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), *West Side Story* (1961), *Atonement* (2007), or even the contemporary HBO television series *Sex and the City*). Finally, other subject areas might provide meaningful thematic connections as follows: Math (balance), Language Arts (love stories, family legends), Science (spring as rebirth, plant life, environment), Social Studies (relationships, collaboration, conflict), and Physical Education (keeping fit). The list of possible thematic relationships is unlimited and determined by the unique experience, knowledge, and curiosity of the viewer(s).

Discerning Significance and Relevance Rooted in Contextual Qualities

Beyond our grasp of the formal and thematic qualities in *Spring*, we can broaden our understanding of its uniqueness by discerning its diverse **contextual** qualities that undergird its creation while building our potential appreciation. *Spring* depicts a park scene in New York City, painted in 1947 by Ben Shahn

(1898-1969). To get at the WHY—the artist’s rationale behind the work, we note that Shahn, engaged in narrative exploration of everyday life, frequently depicted his radical political perspectives, including post-war sentiments and taboo subjects.

To delve deeper into understanding Shahn’s painting, noting its significance and relevance to society and the viewer, we can explore various contexts below that may enlarge our interpretation of *Spring*:

Personally, Lithuanian-born, Jewish artist Ben Shahn was 8 years old when he immigrated to Brooklyn in 1906. He began his career as a lithographer. According to Christopher Andreae (1998), Shahn “insisted that an artist was a visionary and that the technical and manual aspect of his work was never an end in itself. An artist was far more than a manually dexterous artisan.” Furthermore, Andreae (1998) noted that hands, “charged with feeling,” perform a special function in Shahn’s art:

They are (in his hands) a transformable symbol, expressing at turns power, affection, longing, anguish, hope. But his extraordinary depictions of fingers, thumbs, knuckles, fists—of clasping and grasping, reaching, holding and tenderly touching—are more than symbols. They seem to engage directly with meaning.

Socially, Shahn was concerned with social justice and his belief in the regenerative powers of art. In his 1998 retrospective at The Jewish Museum, “Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn,” Susan Chevlowe (1998), curator of the exhibition, noted that “He shared his own experiences and the historical events of his time, transforming them into meaningful commentary on social justice, humanitarian causes, and spiritual redemption.”

Culturally, Shahn was known as a socially and politically activist artist, and in 1932, he gained fame as a result of his series on the trial and death sentence of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Shahn assisted Diego Rivera on frescoes and worked on various government-sponsored projects during the New Deal such as creating murals and posters for the Work Projects Administration (WPA). Working as a photographer for Farm Security Administration, he traveled around America, gaining new perspectives on the post-Depression character and diversity of its citizens.

Historically, Shahn’s *Spring* reveals his response to the haunting effects of World War II and its aftermath. Frances K. Pohl’s (1989) interpretation of the unsettling painting proposes that the image

appears to offer the viewer a choice—escape into the empty and unknown distant landscape or remain in the foreground and confront the troubling relationship between the two figures, with its potential mistrust and deception (the carefree days of childhood cannot be recaptured). Yet it denies that choice by not allowing us to rest at either point on the picture plane.” (p. 50)

Pohl concludes that, “the painting was certainly a fitting metaphor for the spring of 1947, when talk of another world war clouded the future and the

search for communists sowed suspicion and mistrust among the survivors of a more optimistic New Deal era” (p. 50).

Artistically, Shahn was a photographer and painter with versatile interests and accomplishments. He shared a studio with photographer Walker Evans and had his first solo exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in 1930. In both his easel paintings and murals, Shahn’s narratives in series form was a response to the power of film to tell compelling stories and affect social change. In the 1930s, Shahn’s American Social Realism style emerged in response to the social, economic, and political conditions of the Depression. In 1949, at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Shahn debated Robert Motherwell on Realism vs. Abstraction (Wallner, 2001).

Educationally, Shahn was trained as a lithographer, studied in Paris in the 1920s, and became a photographer. In 1956, he was asked to give the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, which were subsequently published as *The Shape of Content* (Shahn, 1957), a well-known book that has influenced artists and art educators.

Politically, Shahn was a Socialist, and in 1931-1932, exhibited the first social protest canvases on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. On the blacklists of the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Shahn’s art was under attack by the House of Representatives as well as a MOMA panel of artists and critics.

Spiritually, while much of Shahn’s narrative work addressed social imbalances and political issues, after World War II, his artistic themes lightened in mood, moving from socially-concerned realism (political-social critiques) to personal realism (psychosocial themes and introspective style).

Drawing directly on Ben Shahn’s art and written ideas, we might consider their significance and relevance for contemporary times. For example, Shahn (1949) wrote:

Art is the creation of human values.... We are living in a time when civilization has become highly expert in the art of destroying human beings and increasingly weak in its power to give meaning to their lives. I don’t know anyone on either side of the water or on either side of the political fence who has the slightest degree of optimism about the direction in which civilization is moving.... It is peculiarly within the province of the artist to minister to man in the somewhat starved area of the spirit. It is for the artist to discover new truths about man and to reaffirm that his life is significant.

Rebalancing Art and Art Education for Greater Significance and Relevance

Rebalancing art and art education through the conceptual mapping approach to exploring art contained in the FTC Palette has the following characteristics: it is focused, dialectical, inclusive (comprehensive), connective, creative, and engaging. Unlike the widely-used Feldman (1987) model for performing art criticism that uses description, formal analysis, interpretation, and judgment as

“sequential” strategies, the lateral nature of FTC invites viewer participation to interact by considering three areas that contribute to the integrity of a work of art. As more information is added to build greater complexity of understanding and connection, the FTC Palette can be compared to a mental weaving—using three warp threads of form, theme, and context that can be interlaced with one another to create a fabric of personal meaning.

The use of FTC emphasizes balance in making connections so that even inexperienced viewers can more fully address thematic relationships and contextual relevance while gaining a clearer understanding of artistic form. For example, looking at the generated text in this article, more information about *Spring* was gleaned regarding meaningful themes and contexts than its form. Made accessible to all, individuals can use their previous knowledge and (re)search the internet or other sources to “fill in the blanks.” The deeper knowledge of art’s enduring ideas embedded in form with accurate (not superficial or “out-of-context”) information, leads to open-ended questions and meaningful connections to art as we relate it to history and our lives.

Beyond its utility in decoding a work of art, the FTC Palette can be used in encoding visual ideas through the creation of works of art as well. For example, in planning a painting (or sculpture, performance, or website) with the theme of spring, FTC considerations would help “visualize” the creative planning process for generating (e.g., sketching) images and ideas in which the formal, thematic, and contextual aspects work together to reveal the unique meaning for the artist contained in complex relationships and grounded ownership. By enlarging the visual thinking process, FTC considerations can help students create and respond to art that is authentic, deep, and meaningful. Students can use this method in the classroom as well as in their personal lives, to become more informed in their visual choice-making, ranging from personal tattoo selection to what to include (and not include) on My Space or Facebook pages.

Whether using FTC to decode or encode works of art, it is a tool to get closer to understanding art and making connections to life. I have tried to demonstrate the case and suggest ways for (re)balancing visual art experience as well as teaching art as a subject through FTC. Furthermore, as indicated below, we can look at FTC in terms of Art and Education, extending the need for rebalancing.

In viewing art’s sense of balance as a subject, one need only to look at existing art theory and traditions to discover the source of content in art instruction, at all educational levels. For example, we might note Modernism as emphasizing form, Postmodernism as emphasizing theme, and Visual Culture as emphasizing context. While this would be a topic for another paper, a paralleled and balanced approach using Form+Theme+Context inclusively combines the vital aspects of modernism, postmodernism, and visual culture while ensuring each of their important contributions and place in our contemporary understanding of art and visual culture.

In viewing education’s sense of balance as a field, we might look at contemporary philosophies driving current educational reform. For example, we might

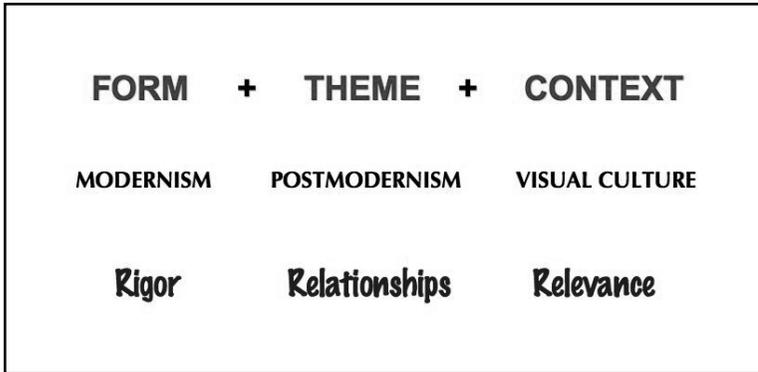


Figure 3. Balancing FTC in Terms of Art and Education.

connect the teaching of art in a balanced way through FTC with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's (n.d.) "new 3Rs" consisting of "Rigor, Relevance and Relationships" used to address high school reform (McCallum, 2007). The latter national effort has focused on funding a rigorous curriculum of challenging courses for all students, classes that are relevant to students' lives, and meaningful relationships with adult role models who push all students to achieve. In contrast to the traditional 3Rs of "Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic," the Gates Foundation's new 3Rs challenges all educators to give all learners a clearer purpose and individual ownership for their developmental growth in community through a new vision of education that transcends old models of schooling. These 3Rs are equally pertinent to deepening the power of arts learning through FTC when focusing on the rigor of skill and structure (form), understanding and establishing meaningful relationships (theme), and appreciation of significance and relevance (context).

Finally, although written over 50 years ago, Ben Shahn's (1957) written ideas in *The Shape of Content* correspond with a balanced FTC approach. In his final chapter, "The Education of an Artist," Shahn identifies "three conditions that seem to be basic in the artist's equipment: To be cultured [which Shahn defines as perceptiveness], to be educated, and to be integrated" (pp. 111-112). Shahn notes that, "the capacity to value and to perceive are inseparable from the cultured person. These are indispensable qualities for the artist too, almost as necessary as are his eyes—to look and look, and think, and listen, and be aware." Noting that "education itself might be looked upon as mainly the assimilation of experience" (p. 115), Shahn emphasizes the value of both a liberal university education as well as self-education. Being integrated, according to Shahn, means:

Being unified ... integration implies involvement of the whole person, ... integration ... of kinds of knowledge (history comes to life in the art of any period); integration of knowledge with thinking—and that means holding opinions; and then integration within the whole personality—and that implies holding some unified philosophical view,

an attitude towards life ... uniting of this personality, this view, with the creative capacities of the person so that his acts and his works and his thinking and his knowledge will be a unity. Such a state of being, curiously enough, invokes the word integrity in its basic sense: being unified, being integrated. (pp. 116-117)

Shahn's conditions, presented as "the basic equipment of artists" (p. 117), also parallel Form+Theme+Context as well as contemporary educational goals, emphasizing rigor, relationships, and relevance needed to educate all citizens.

Seeing A Bigger Picture for 21st-Century Art Education

In envisioning the changing forms, themes, and contexts of 21st-century art, education, and art education, the critical function of visual literacy for all learners—cradle to grave, not only impacts the responsibility of all teachers, and thus, their training but curriculum and instruction as well. Visually educating all citizens for meaningful engagement, deeper understanding, and stronger communal connections can be enhanced through the use of a balanced Form+Theme+Context approach that considers:

- formal dimensions of learning processes influenced by technology and our increasingly visual world in which all students will need skills to create using pencils, brushes, and scissors along with digital keyboards, scanners, and cameras as well as solve problems using an increasingly wide range of digital interactive tools;
- thematic dimensions of visual concepts that involve engaging all learners with big ideas and meaningful interdisciplinary relationships while critically responding to information overload as they "read" words, images, animation, and subtext; and
- contextual dimensions of knowing that address meaning in our students' lives in terms of personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, spiritual, and other aspects of significance and relevance to human experience.

Using Form+Theme+Context (FTC) to rebalance art education for fuller engagement and deeper understanding can help make the visual language of art more meaningful and accessible to all 21st century learners. FTC can be seen as a pragmatic theory insofar as art is conceptualized in terms of its effects on its audience and the creation of specific shared experiences. In nurturing the latter, the heart of our pedagogical practice, perhaps FTC can provide guidance needed to enhance every viewer's ability to truly **see** through learned skills in interpreting visual ideas, aesthetic valuing of beauty, power and pleasure, creative growth through inspirational experiences, and communication that promotes historical and cultural understanding while becoming part of our evolving community—local to global.

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