

## **Is the Reception of Emotional Expression in Visual Art Global?**

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## Is the Reception of Emotional Expression in Visual Art Global?

### **Abstract:**

Pictures don't live in isolation from a context of comprehension and response. According to Gretchen Barbatsis, the notion that meaning is something added to a piece of art has important connotation in the way we conceptualize art. The dynamic understanding of visual interpretation is a mutual process, in which the artwork and the viewer add something to one another. Art conveys meanings, reflects moods, motivates both feelings and actions, and engages the viewer into a vivid dialogue with the artwork. Artists through the ages have been expressing deep feelings and sufferings. The expressiveness of figurative art moves the viewer, not only to admire the artist, but to feel the expressed emotions themselves.

Can we call a picture-viewer engagement global? Local cultures are expanding and changing rapidly and affected by globalization; however there are different understandings of this term in different localities. Many eastern and western examples in the history of art show similar visual emotional expressions. Although the reception of emotional expression in visual art depends on local cultures and individual factors, a pre-read art-related text results in a similar eastern and western reception of the same visual expression. Whether it is an interpretation, criticism or art history, a pre-read text is valuable before seeing the artwork. It configures the viewer's rational and psychological involvements with artwork itself and affects the way he/she receives it. Regardless of the viewer's cultural, political, religious backgrounds he/she is involved in a meaning-making process. Every viewer tries to understand ideas and meanings in what is presented in artwork.

The aim of this article is to investigate the picture-viewer interaction, the emotional involvement in visual art and the meaning-making process. Two eastern and western artworks are selected for their visual emotional expression: the Assyrian wall-relief *Dying Lioness* and the Hellenistic sculpture *Laocoön*. Both sculptures share painful death, heroic and pathetic presentations. They bring eastern and western expression closer to the viewer.

### **Picture-Viewer Relationship:**

Artworks are neither separated from their contexts of conception nor are from their reaction. A pre-read text is a mental preparation for the meaning-maker viewer. An artwork is meant to have meaning by viewers as the conclusion of an action or a feedback of a communication process (Freund 1987).<sup>1</sup> The object of study for the reception theorists is the act of meaning-making instead of artworks or artists (Barbatsis 2005).<sup>2</sup> The meaning in an image is not in its visual sign, nor in the sociological positions and identities of the audience, but "in the articulation between viewer and viewed, between the power of the image to signify and the viewer's capacity to interpret meaning" (Evans; Hall 1999).<sup>3</sup> It is the viewer who gives the artwork its meaning and definition; "the spectator creates the art as much as the artist does. Art creates and effectively changes the viewer according to the true aesthetic experience (Jones 1997)."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the same artwork is read differently whether by the same viewer or other viewers. The common triangle of viewer-image-meaning is very complex; it is not simply a cause-effect relationship, nor is a conclusion of an action as Freund mentions. There are many interacting elements lead to an outcome that depends on "culture and cultural practices of looking and seeing" (O'Donnell 2005).<sup>5</sup> The art viewer, regardless of his/her cultural, political, religious backgrounds is involved in a meaning-making process. Although the process seems different from a viewer to another, can we still call a picture-viewer engagement global? According to O'Donnell, both local cultures and the differences in observing artworks affect the viewer's approach to seeing artworks. The local cultures, which are affected by globalization, have different understanding and different ways of perceiving things, including artworks. An art-viewer goes through a meaning-making process; meanings themselves are not global because understanding them depends on individual factors.

### **Emotional Involvement in Visual Art**

Emotion is a vital force in all art forms. We experience positive and negative emotions like happiness, love, satisfaction, fascination, hate, sorrow, sadness, reverence, depression, vulnerability, disgust, fear, anxiety, surprise, threat, etc. They are distinguished by different kinds of evaluations; some emotional responses involve a mixture of pleasure and displeasure, fear and joy. Normal emotional performance needs classification of motivation such as having a stored emotional significance in bodily reactions. What exactly generates emotions? How do we effectively evaluate

and conceptualize them? Robinson (2005) answers this question relying on psychology; our biological organism has preference and aversion.<sup>6</sup> Feeling is the proper bodily change associated through learning from past experiences with similar cases. We not only emotionally respond to things we are naturally familiar to evaluate affectively, but to motivation that have been categorized as threats of our individual experiences (Damasio 1999).<sup>7</sup> The variety of events taking place in emotion progression is "a process that to some extent unfolds independently" (Green 2008).<sup>8</sup> When a viewer makes the right judgment on an artwork by seeing things the right way, sometimes he/she can't emotionally respond because physiological activities is missing (Robinson 2005). There are distinct physiological profiles for each emotion that show distinctive involuntary activities, facial expressions, vocal expressions, etc.<sup>9</sup> Emotion is not an answer, a condition or a temperament; it is a process and a sequence of events (Ledoux 1998).<sup>10</sup> It is a spontaneous mental state accompanied by physiological changes, while feeling is the capacity to experience it. Emotion can't be directly arrested, but revealed through expressions (Pernau 2009).<sup>11</sup> Some viewers reject art that represents familiar emotions for the favor of individual expression of individual emotion (Kloos 2009).<sup>12</sup> When emotions are revealed, simply their visual expressions are what the viewer expects to see.

### **Visual Expressive Examples:**

Artists through the ages have been expressing deep human sufferings in artworks. Visual expression moves the viewer to admire the talented artist and to feel the expressed emotions themselves. Two ancient examples are selected from different civilizations to present tragic emotional expression in visual art. The first example is an Assyrian wall relief from Nineveh, *Dying Lioness* (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> It is a tragic scene full of energy and considered one of the earliest examples that represent emotional expression of pain.<sup>14</sup> Her spinal cord is injured after being struck by three arrows; therefore she has to crawl forward while dragging her paralyzed limbs (Naderi 2004).<sup>15</sup> It is also noticed that blood flows from her wounds. What a viewer sees is a sad conflict between life and death; a half body is dead, the other half is trying to resist in vain. Steves (2008) describes this artwork as: "a lioness roars in pain and frustration. She tries to run, but her body is too heavy. Her muscular hind legs, once the source of her power, are now paralyzed. ... The mood of tragedy, dignity, and proud struggle in a hopeless cause makes this dying lioness simply one of the most

beautiful of human creations."<sup>16</sup> The artist gives a brutal reading of the strained muscles, "the swelling veins, the corrugations of the muzzle, the flattened ears—once more a hard realism under control of the formality of silhouette in low relief" (La Croix and Tansey 1986).<sup>17</sup>

The Assyrian relief allows the viewer "to observe the systematic development of aesthetic forms of expression" (Bonatz 2009).<sup>18</sup> Visual art approached aesthetic means as a new language to emphasize violence as a way to scare enemies. Although the scene intended to present what a heroic king did, the dying animal turns the scene into a tragedy in which the victims is the real hero (Frankfort 1970).<sup>19</sup> Bringing up such suffering to represent emotional expression may not be the aim of the ancient artist. The artist wanted to focus on bravery and strength of King Ashurbanipal over the proud king of the jungle. This subject matter was common in ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern art to show the comparison of kings.<sup>20</sup>

Both ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian arts influenced Western art, especially the Hellenistic, where we reach the second example, *Laocoön* (Fig. 2), a sculpture from Greece. It is another powerful emotional expression in visual art.<sup>21</sup> In Hellenistic era, Greek settlers in Persia, Egypt and Mesopotamia were influenced by local cultures and traditions. Bernal (1987) discusses the influence of other ancient cultures on the Greek culture, literature and art.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the direct contact between the Greek world and the East, eastern cultures were influenced by Greeks as well and cross cultures emerged (Higgins 2009).<sup>23</sup> A unique style in figurative art was developed carrying both idealized human figures and extreme representation of deep emotion.<sup>24</sup> The origin of such visual expression is not only indebted to imitation of reality, but to imagination which can go further and express both hidden images and emotions,<sup>25</sup> while imitation is limited to one moment in time and to what is only seen.

The artist can only show emotional expression that visibly revealed in body language. Dubos (1733) affirms that the fine art stimulates passion to affect the viewer the same way imitated objects themselves do.<sup>26</sup> The viewer sees the most terrible silence in human conflict when "the outcry of terror of pain is stifled in exertion ... The first sound of fear is in drawing, not expelling, the breath ... *Laocoön* suffers in silence" (Bell 1819).<sup>27</sup> A deep fervor is provoked when the viewer sees *Laocoön* sculpture

because "the representational arts ... represent the horrible by showing us the horrible" (Schupbach 2009), which is not the case in literature.<sup>28</sup> Lessing describes the physical pain of *Laocoön* as the most violent suffering, which is revealed in his face and every muscle. Lessing (1766) states that:

One can almost feel it oneself in the painful contraction of the abdomen without looking at the face ... this pain expresses itself without any sign of rage either in his face or in his posture. He does not raise his voice in a terrible scream ... the way in which his mouth is open does not permit it ... He felt and feared, and he expressed his pain and grief. He was not ashamed of any human weakness, but it must not prevent him from attaining honor nor from fulfilling his duty ... The Greek acted from principles... Heroism was like the spark hidden in the flint.

In both examples, the lioness and the old man with his two sons are dying in dignity, showing heroic and pathetic. The animal and the human beings share the same fate and their bodies greatly suffer revealing emotional expression. As seen in the first example, the animal is killed by Man; in the second example, men are killed by animals. The killing process is done to prove the power of kings and the power of gods, as if creatures are created to torture each others. If both artworks have been seen without a pre-read text, they may not impress the viewer nor be correctly understood. In other words, reading some information before visiting the artworks, the viewer will be able to observe more details, admire the artist's visual expression and appreciate the aesthetic experience.

Art appreciation stimulates positive feelings and influences people to dedicate time to enjoy visual art (Grinde 1996).<sup>29</sup> Appreciation is enhanced by reading art-related text like description, interpretation, history and/or criticism because such knowledge acquaintances, familiarizes and teaches the common viewer how to communicate with art work. Both Walton (1970)<sup>30</sup> and Carlson (1998)<sup>31</sup> believe that scientific knowledge of artistic traditions and styles is required to aesthetically appreciate art. Moreover, knowledge of art guides the viewer "in locating the relevant appreciable features" (Matthews 2008).<sup>32</sup> Art appreciation depends on knowledge and understanding facts about the visual experience as it is meant to be (Grinde 1996). There is another element in the appreciation which is the communicative aspect and seeking knowledge (Wilson 1975).<sup>33</sup> When the artist creates an artwork, we as viewers admit, tend to rummage around for a message. Visual language is transformed into verbal language.

## **The Meaning-Making Process**

On the one hand, interpreting the artwork could be as important as viewing it because it assists and structures the viewer's viewing process. On the other hand, Susan Sontag (1966) believes that interpretation kills the artwork because it only concerns contents, meanings and ideas not the art forms themselves.<sup>34</sup> She only encourages art criticism and development of the right and accurate vocabulary to describe visual forms and presentations without digging deep in its content. She is looking for a language capable of expressing visual forms and evoking feelings. Although interpreting visual art may be a minor process comparing to experiencing its aesthetic forms, the relationship between artwork and the language we use to explain it is essential for dynamic understanding (Holly 2007).<sup>35</sup> The truth in art always depends on the way it is interpreted (Heidegger 1975).<sup>36</sup> Interpretation is a mutual process, in which the artwork and the viewer add something to one another (Jones 1997).

Figurative art engages the viewer into a vivid dialogue with the artwork. This process needs more consideration, examining what the artwork does to the viewer and vice versa. Understanding is not always understood as Gadamer (1989)<sup>37</sup> puts it because if verbal illiteracy issue is considered, the written interpretation may be limited or incapable of standing by itself.<sup>38</sup> Time is another critical element in interpreting art; the history of any artwork and the moment of its reception by the viewer are uniting together to make a complete history of this specific artwork (Jauss 1982).<sup>39</sup> This alludes to the well known triangle: the artist, the artwork and the viewer; three factors have to be active and aware of each other's role. Culler (1981) believes the artwork "doesn't inherent meaning" nor speaks, but it does answer the readers' queries.<sup>40</sup> He implies that viewers overload artwork with power that is not there. We, the viewers over expect from artworks. Marmor (2005) states that "the concept of interpretation is vague ... used somewhat loosely, to mean any kind of 'explanation', or 'understanding', or 'theorizing'."<sup>41</sup> Although explanation or reasoning is distinctively used instead of interpretation, they are some sorts of communication. Sometimes interpreting art as an explanation of the meaning is unclear. Many other forms of social practices and behaviors seem capable of bearing some meanings as objects of interpretation (Endicott 1994).<sup>42</sup> The nature of interpretation may be categorized in three approaches: first, interpretation does its best to illuminate objects; second, it

depends on genres; and third, it is restricted and limited depending on a given object (Dowrkin 1986).<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Visual culture is expanding and changing rapidly, therefore the picture-viewer relationship which is supposed to depend greatly on culture and its ways of seeing is changing as well. Artwork-viewer relationship for many depends on extrinsic factors, like reading criticism, interpretation, influence and /or history. For few it is a result of intrinsic quality in the artwork; they see the sign as indicator for symbolic images and the images as art objects. They also look for internal connections, associations and meaning as a living process that is continuously developed. The meaning-making process in figurative art involves the viewer. This process is augmented when emotional expression is revealed. Aesthetics exists in the viewer's mind not in the image. "For vast majority of people, it would appear that interest in the image's form, in its aesthetic, is of lesser concern than that which it denotes or connotes" (Jamieson 2007).<sup>44</sup>

The dynamic understanding of visual interpretation is a reciprocated process, in which the artwork and the viewer add something to one another. The viewer is emotionally involved in the meaning-making process. The visual expression of suffering is similarly revealed in both eastern and western selected works. As a correspondence, the reception of pain and suffering may be alike when a pre-text is read by eastern or western viewers, whether the victim is an animal or a human being.<sup>45</sup> Art-related knowledge structures the viewers and helps them understand and correctly appreciate the artworks, regardless of their cultural differences. Can we call the reception of emotional expression in visual art global or universal? The question is still open for further investigations.

Fig. 1 Dying Lioness, a wall relief, Ashurbanipal's Palace, Nineveh,  
Limestone, 645 B.C, British Museum, (38 x 63 cm.).

Fig. 2 Laocoön, Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus, 160-20 B.C., Marble, The Vatican Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (Princeton University press, 1987,  
 p. 142).

<sup>2</sup> Gretchen Barbatsis, "Reception Theory" in Kenneth Louis Smith (ed.) *Handbook of Visual  
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<sup>3</sup> Jessica Evans; Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture* (London, 1999, p. 537).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Jones, "The Case Against Objectifying Art," *Creativity Research Journal* (Vol. 10, No. 2,  
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<sup>5</sup> Victoria O'Donnell, "Cultural Studies Theory," in Kenneth Louis Smith (ed.) *Handbook of Visual  
 Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (Routledge, 2005, p. 524).

<sup>6</sup> Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford  
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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (Heinemann: London, 1999, p. 213).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher D. Green, *Classics in the History of Psychology: What is an Emotion? William James-1884* (York University, Toronto, Ontario, 2008). <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/emotion.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Autonomic nervous system is part of the peripheral nervous system and can be divided into sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions, which complement each other. See: W.A. Newman Dorland, *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, (Ed.) Douglas Anderson (Philadelphia: Saunders/Elsevier, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Ledoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1998, p. 98).

<sup>11</sup> Margrit Pernau, "Emotions and Their Expression: Music, Dance, Painting and Film in India," *Max Planck Institute for Human Development* (2009). <http://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/forschung/gg/projects/emotions.html>

<sup>12</sup> Willem Kloos, "*Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (8 Mar. 2009). <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/320135/Willem-Johan-Theodoor-Kloos>>.

<sup>13</sup> The Assyrian Empire (2400-612 B.C.) was known for its powerful army, great library, art and architecture. The ancient capital Ashur was 160 miles north-northwest of modern Baghdad. The king Ashurbanipal was known for his exceedingly cruel action to enemies. Also he was proud of his education; he could read the cuneiform script in Akkadian and Sumerian. This was the time of *the Epic of Creation* and *the Epic of Gilgamesh*.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Homberger, *Ezra Pound* (Routledge, 1997). The author quotes the French sculptor Gaudier Brzeska (1891-1915) who preferred this wall relief "as opposed to the alleged effeminacy of Greek" (p. 120).

<sup>15</sup> Sait Naderi, "History of the Spinal Cord Localization" *Neurosurg Focus* (Vol. 16, 2004, p.5).

<sup>16</sup> Rick Steves, *London Museum* (London: Avalon, 2008, p. 141).

<sup>17</sup> Horst de la Croix; Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art through the Ages* (H. B. Jovanovich, 1986, p. 61).

<sup>18</sup> Dominik Bonatz, "The Ancient Near East: A History of Images," *Freie Universität Berlin* (2009). <http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/>

<sup>19</sup> Henri Frankfort, *The Pelican History of Art: The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Victoria: Penguin Books, 1970, p. 190).

<sup>20</sup> See Tutankhamen's painted chest with scenes like Hunting Lions, 1350 B.C..

<sup>21</sup> What is available today in the Vatican Museum is a Roman copy that was excavated in Rome in 1506.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (London: Free Association Books, 1987, p. 232).

<sup>23</sup> Reynold Alleyne Higgins, "Western sculpture" *In Encyclopedia Britannica Online* (21 Feb. 2009). <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/530221/Western-sculpture>.

<sup>24</sup> Higgins adds that idealized human figures were facilitated by the Greeks' traditional concern with proportion and pattern.

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- <sup>25</sup> In his introduction to Lessing's, McCormick (1984) quotes Philostratus the Elder (A.D. 200). Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Trans., Intro, and Notes by Edward Allen McCormick (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. xiii). McCormick uses Philostratus the Elder's book: *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Ch. VI (p. 19, A.D. 200).
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- <sup>35</sup> Michael Ann Holly, "Reciprocity and Reception," In Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (eds), *A Companion to Art Theory in Blackwell Companions Cultural Studies Series* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007, p. 448)
- <sup>36</sup> M. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art." In A. Hofstadter (ed.) *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p. 35).
- <sup>37</sup> H. G. Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," In D. P. Michelfelder and R. E. Palmer (eds.) *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p.96).
- <sup>38</sup> Verbal illiteracy is not a problem because knowledge of art can orally reach the viewers before seeing the artwork of study.
- <sup>39</sup> H. G. Jauss, "Theses on the Transition from the Aesthetics of Literary Works to Theory of Aesthetic Experience." In M. J. Valdes and O. J. Miller (eds). *Interpretation of Narrative* (University of Toronto Press, 1982, p. 20-21).
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- <sup>41</sup> Marmor, Andrei. *Interpretation and Legal Theory* (Hart Publishing, 2005).
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<sup>43</sup> R. Dworkin, R. "The Original Position," in N. Daniels (ed.) *Reading Rawls* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 21).

<sup>44</sup> G. Harry Jamieson, *Visual communication: More than Meets the Eye* (Intellect Books, 2007, p. 86).

<sup>45</sup> The researcher's reception of the visual expressions in both examples may be considered as the eastern reading of the selected artworks, comparing to the western views mentioned above.