

Purpose and feelings

THE HISTORY OF THE GAZE

Does my eye need to be educated, or can I just look without learning how?

Artists create sensitive work and use their knowledge to help in the reception of their pieces. Whether intuitively or empirically, they know and use the qualities of their tools: the colours that draw us in or push us away, the light that acts as a focal point, the perspective that forces us to look into the distance, the material that captures our attention, to varying degrees. By coming to understand and playing with these subtle understandings, the artist can guide and even force us to look where they want us to, offering us certain keys to unravelling the work. But can I understand what I see? And do I need to understand the work to appreciate it? After an initial more spontaneous, and perhaps more aesthetic response, which I may be happy with, adding to my knowledge may help me develop how I approach the artwork. We must also admit to the emotional power of certain works, conceived to be experienced rather than understood. The seeming simplicity of the monochrome paintings favoured by major artists such as Mark Rothko offers visitors the freedom to read and feel as they want, to be the sole interpreters of their own emotions.

How can I make sure that I have good taste?

If I don't like an artwork, aren't I questioning the educated choice of the museum professionals who have contributed to the knowledge of art history and worked to share it with us? But having confidence in our museum professionals and their systematic validation of the choices of collectors, patrons, curators and exhibition organisers does not mean that I have to like them, dislike them or actually make any personal judgement. The very definition of beauty is a source of debate. From Homer to Marcel Duchamp,

via Plato, Giorgio Vasari, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud, philosophers and theorists prefer the term "aesthetics of art" instead of "beauty of art", which implies the idea of the ugly as its opposite. On one side, harmony, symmetry, order and measure, and on the other, disharmony, dissonance, disorder and excess. This, though, reduces the work of art to a single role, that of illustrator of the sublime and the lovely, when it is also a reflection of the human soul and thought. So talking about good taste is as difficult as talking about beautiful art!

What if I'm seeing things the wrong way?

If I look at a work of art and find that what I understand isn't exactly the truth or that it doesn't tell what I thought it was telling, then I can imagine the artist isn't good at transmitting ideas, or that understanding the work needed knowledge I didn't possess. But what can we say when it is someone's life that has given us an inaccurate impression? Let's take as an example Giuseppe Arcimboldo's *Four Seasons*. Owned by the Louvre and recently restored, these works are now revealed to us stripped of the flowers that so beautifully framed the four figures composed of fruits and vegetables. Most likely added in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, these wreaths meant that earlier audiences believed that the Italian artist preferred such decorative additions in place of a dark, sober background. The Louvre's scientists and other professionals decided to restore these works to their original aspect, in keeping with what the artist and his patron, Emperor Maximilian II, wanted. This example makes it clear how difficult it can be for anybody to completely grasp the meaning of a work, but it also relieves us of any guilt at being the only one responsible for how we understand it!

Juliette Barthélémy

Z. Giuseppe
Arcimboldo
Milan, Italy,
c. 1527-1593
Autumn
15/23
Oil on canvas
H. 76; W. 64 cm





33. Unknown
provenance
Amulet of Sekhmet
c. 1000-664 BCE
(Third Intermediate
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 10.2; W. 1.12;
D. 3.56 cm



34. EGYPT
Amulet of the
goddess Taweret
c. 664-332 BCE (Late
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 10.2; W. 3.1;
D. 4.4 cm



35. EGYPT
Amulet of the
goddess Taweret
c. 664-332 BCE (Late
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 9.2; W. 1.5;
D. 2.2 cm

36. EGYPT
Falcon amulet
c. 664-332 BCE (Late
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 6.48; W. 1.72;
D. 4 cm

37. EGYPT
Falcon-headed
crocodile amulet
c. 664-332 BCE (Late
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 1.7; W. 4.04;
D. 0.95 cm

38. EGYPT
Baboon amulet
c. 664-332 BCE (Late
Period)
Siliceous
earthenware
H. 5.74; W. 3.2;
D. 2.9 cm



Life here and beyond

The belief that there is a life after death profoundly affected faith, practices and burial sites. Under the Old Kingdom, mummification was reserved for kings and their entourage, as was access to the eternal heavens. Monumental stone tombs, the pyramids built by the first kings illustrate a conception that life in the afterlife presupposes the preservation of the physical remains, protected from the degradations of putrefaction and looting.

Over the centuries, the idea of a second birth accessible to all became popular, but inequalities remained; while the poorest were sometimes simply washed and left on the desert sands, the most well off received treatment considered appropriate to their rank, through a process of mummification designed to preserve the body from decomposition.

To be accepted into the afterlife and offered eternal life, deceased Egyptians had to go through a series of exact steps, of which the sarcophagus and cartonnage of Djedkhonsuefankh [fig. 39], a priest of Amun who died between the eighteenth and tenth century BCE, are a very striking example. A mixture of linen and plaster, this kind of funerary wrapping was designed to protect the mummy inside the sarcophagus, and depicts the presentation to Osiris, god of the dead. Ruling god of the afterlife, he is accompanied by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys. Horus, recognisable by his falcon head, is presenting the deceased to them; his four sons stand on a water lily to ensure the protection of the dead man and his mummified organs.

39. THEBES (today Luxor, Egypt)
Funerary complex of Djedkhonsuefankh:
cartonnage funerary wrapping and coffin
c. 943-725 BCE (22nd dynasty)
Composite fabric, mummified, gilded and
painted wood, wood paint
D. 33; W. 42; L. 169 cm

ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS



ON THE BANKS OF THE NEAR EAST,



IN THE HEART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

AT THE BEGINNINGS OF TIME

ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS

THE QUESTION(S) OF THE MIDDLE AGES

EUROPE OF RENAISSANCE(S), BAROQUE EUROPE

FROM THE GRAND SIÈCLE TO THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

FROM THE FIRST EMPIRE UNTIL 1848:
THE RISE OF MODERN SENSIBILITIES



77. ANNULUS (now lost, Algeria)
Portrait of a young boy
c. 165-170
Marble
H. 23; W. 17 cm



78. ITALY
Portrait of an unknown man
c. 225-250
Marble
H. 72; W. 58.5 cm

79. ITALY
"Julius Caesar" heroic statue
First quarter of the 1st century CE
Marble
H. 220; W. 110; D. 72 cm

known. These latter don't express a taste for simple repetition as much as the Roman world's exceptional ability to assimilate contributions from other civilisations.

The resolute expression on his gaunt face, the hairstyle with the locks pulled over the forehead, and the outline of the lips initially led art historians to identify it as a portrait of Julius Caesar. Although this hypothesis has been rejected, it could be part of an official art style that employed the assassinated dictator's countenance to invoke his aura and legacy. This would seem to be a logical step for Augustus, Julius Caesar's adopted son. Representing power extended to the imperial family, at times escaping the hieratic character of the official portrait, often with indifferent or impassive expressions. This head [fig. 77] represents a child of six or seven, its look gentle and melancholic. The hair is encircled by a double laurel, signalling a member of the imperial family, and the sculptor's treatment of the eyes, with their thick lashes and hollowed pupils, allow it to be dated to the rule of Marcus Aurelius in the late second century. Most likely this is Annulus Verus, the twelfth of Marcus Aurelius's fourteen children, younger brother of Commodus, the last of the Antonines. He died from an ear tumour at the age of seven; his faraway look evokes his early death, while also reflecting the grief that affected an entire family, without care that they were imperial.

