Some of the Ways in Which Pictures Communicate

(based on the chapter about looking at picture books in my book *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*)

Ideas about What Pictures Are For

1. Pictures attract attention. Art historian E. H. Gombrich says, "The visual image is supreme in its capacity for **arousal.**" If an otherwise bare wall has a picture hanging on it, you're more likely to look at the picture than at other parts of the wall—and to look at it expecting to find some sort of meaning in it.
2. Pictures express the **assumptions** of the culture they emerge from about what pictures are for—the idea that some pictures are primarily functional (signs representing genders on a toilet door) while others, like paintings in a gallery, are meant to give pleasure or, sometimes, to engender admiration or awe at their reputation or their commercial value); or that some pictures are primarily representational (passport photos) while others are meant to have aesthetic aspects or convey more than just physical appearance (photographic portraits in galleries; or that some visual representations (like exploded views of buildings that show the layout of the rooms, or like abstract paintings in art galleries) represent aspects of objects other than what we might see in looking at them.
3. Even representational images are most meaningful in the context of a kind of language of **learned codes** and make little sense to anyone without a previous knowledge of the codes. E. H. Gombrich says, "Everything points to the conclusion that the phrase the 'language of art' is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata" (87). Pictures relate to, make use of, and are expressions of all the ways their artists and viewers think about themselves and the world.
4. There are also codes specific to the visible world of pictures . As Arthur Danto says, "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry--an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an **artworld.**" Art exists in, refers to, and comments on the art its authors is aware of.

Format

5. The **shapes and sizes** of pictures affect what might be depicted in them, how it might be depicted (e.g., larger canvases allow for larger patches of colour), and how we understand what they mean).
6. Also, then, sculpture allows for different ways of understanding what they depict than two-dimensional images do—as do videos, tapestries, etc.
7. The **shape** of a canvas might help to determine content, or vice versa; landscapes tend to wider than they are high, unlike portraits—and if they contain people, we are invited to think of how the setting affects the life of the people in it or about the interrelationships of the various people it includes--topics unlikely for a narrower image focused on one person to explore.
8. Formatting choices such as the width and colour of borders around pictures and even the style of their frames can influence how we understand what a picture depicts. Wide borders might suggest constraint or distance, the absence of borders (or frames) a refusal to be constrained.

Mood: Predominating Characteristics

9. A series of choices of media, predominating hues, various intensities of colour, kinds of lines and shapes, etc., come together to provide a [picture with a specific **mood** or atmosphere.
10. The predominating **hues** of a picture convey the conventional meanings of those colours. Viewers might see pictures in which greens predominate as restful because many people associate green with peaceful forests, or as unsettling because they associate green with decay or being ill. Some hues have **conventional associations** with emotions that have no actual relationship to them: because of a traditional association with the Virgin Mary, predominating blues might suggest serenity, or, because of the kind of music called "the blues," suggest sadness.
11. **Shades,** the relative brightness or darkness of hues, might also add meaning. People tend to identify darker shades with gloomier subjects, lighter ones with happier subjects. Sometimes, a choice of hues might suggest surprising meanings by contradicting the apparent meaning of what is being depicted—for instance, a somber-hued depiction of a supposedly happy day at the beach.
12. **Saturation**, the relative intensity of colours. i.e., the degree to which they have been mixed with white, also conveys meanings. More saturated colors seem more vibrant, less saturated ones more gentle. They then suggest attitudes toward the subject of the picture.
13. Pictures can also convey meaning by **avoiding** predominating effects. While subtle blends of related hues or shades may express peace or calm, patches of unrelated colors in shocking combinations convey energy and excitement.
14. In part because of their relative lack of vibrancy, in part because if thier traditional use in old newspaper photographs and documentary films, pictures in **black and white** tend to imply seriousness and authenticity.
15. **Predominating shapes and lines**: rounded shapes

are associated with softness and yielding, angular ones with rigidity and orderliness. Viewers tend to see uncompleted lines as unstable and energetic, while lines that enclose space seem more stable and restful. When one of these possibilities predominates, there's a strong effect on the mood of a picture.

Media

16. Gombrich says, "The image cannot give us more information than the medium can carry." Block prints can reveal texture only with difficulty. Collage inhibits the creation of depth. Watercolor in its translucency creates the impression of light more readily than tempera does. Media choices thus affect mood and meaning.
17. Many media are associated with specific ideas or emotions. Viewers tend to see woodcuts as simple and folk-like, oil paintings as richly elegant, photographs are accurate depictions of reality.

Style

18. **Style**, the effect of all the aspects of a work considered together, develops from all the various choices an artist makes about both subject and means of presentation.
19. The styles of a picture can communicate meanings by drawing upon **stylistic conventions** that already have connotations. We expect pictures in the style of *cartooning*--exaggerated *caricatures*--to be funny, more representational pictures to be more serious.
20. Some examples of stylistic meanings: **Surrealism** depicts unrealistic situations in a highly representational way that makes the impossible seem strangely possible and suggests the unstable nature of what we usually consider to be reality.
21. **Impressionism** tends to connote dreaminess and romanticism.
22. **National Styles** carry connotation also, and reference to them might evoke the places of their origin and or conventional assumptions about those places or cultures.
23. Artists can deliberately or unconsciously evoke the styles of **particular artists** as a response to or commentary on their own subjects—show the absurdity of a situation by making use of the style of Dali, echo the pose of Botticelli's Venus, etc.

The Meanings of Visual Objects

24. While overall qualities like design and style help convey the mood and meaning of a story, most of the information that pictures provide comes from the specific figures and objects they depict. These figures become meaningful through the contexts they evoke, which allow viewers to relate them to their knowledge and experience of life, literature, and visual art. Once we identify an object in a painting as, say, a chair, it can evoke all of our associations with chairs, their uses, their history, our own memories of them, etc. In abstract art, circular shapes evoke and thus draw on our associations with circular objects in reality.
25. Visual objects in pictures can develop **weight**, ie., attract attention, through an artist's use of **symbolism** and **codes**.
26. Visual **symbolism** is the use of physical objects to represent abstract ideas. Cross shapes evoke Christian ideas for those aware of the significance of the cross in Christianity. Objects as various as apples, black cats, holly, spiders, bats, water, clouds, eyes, towers etc., etc. have specific meanings in various cultural contexts.
27. Both **Freudian** and **Jungian** psychoanalysts suggest that specific visual images have a deeper unconscious content. It's not difficult to find dark Jungian shadows or pointed Freudian phallic objects in pictures. Not all Freudian imagery is so obvious, and the surprise of finding subtle implications in surprising ways in pictures can be a source of pleasure (or discomfort) as well as enriched meaning.
28. Some of the more obvious narrative implications of pictures depend not on specific symbols but on basic cultural **codes--**signs that stand for other meanings (like red lights on highways or the symbol P to stand for a particular sound in what we read) that have no resemblance to what they stand for and that people tend to take for granted. Depictions of these codes evoke their conventional meanings.
29. More generally, we tend to identify dark with evil and light with goodness, associate peace and joy with green spaces, and depression with empty, boxlike spaces.
30. We interpret the **gestures and postures** of characters in terms of cultural codes----understand the meanings of hands being shaked or hands waving goodbye, or knowing that upturned heads mean happiness, slumped heads despair.
31. There are also assumptions about the connections between **physical appearance** and character or emotions. Certain appearances project evil or goodness, slyness or stupidity, fear or anger, etc.

Pictorial Dynamics

32. Meanings also emerge from the relationships that the various objects in pictures have with each other. There are two possible forms of relationships: those between objects on the **two-dimensional** plane of the picture's surface, and those between objects in the **three-dimensional** space the picture implies.
33. Square **shapes** are rigid, round ones accommodating. So characters placed inside constricting boxes seem oppressed, and rounded shapes don't.
34. Some shapes can also **direct attention** to other shapes-; e.g. arrow-like shapes might point to the main

focus of the picture.

35. Larger figures tend to have more **weight** than smaller ones—draw more attention--and we tend to focus on them first. But other qualities can give smaller objects more importance—e.g, if one single human in a picture is surrounded by many similar trees, it stands out and seems more important.
36. So, sometimes, does one tree surrounded by people. But the mere **presence of a human figure** amongst other objects gives it weight. People tend to consider people more important than other things.
37. The **size** of characters in relation to their background may imply relationships between character and environment. Characters depicted as small shapes surrounded by forests or large empty rooms seem threatened or lost. If the figure of a character were enlarged so that it filled the space, the same figure would seem much less bleak.
38. The **location** of an object in a picture can give it more or less emphasis. A figure at the center of a picture tends to have more weight than those on the sides. If artists wish to attract attention to figures other than those in the center, they must do so by making use of one or more of the other techniques outlined here.
39. The layout of the objects in a picture in relation to one another implies **invisible shapes**: circles, rectangles, squares, or triangles that form the picture's composition. Since these patterns create **order** and balance, a **disruption** of them implies disorder.
40. Objects in a field of other objects stand out less than **isolated** ones, and figures sharply isolated from their background stand out more than those that blend in. Sometimes, artists might emphasize specific figures by depicting them against relatively empty backgrounds or by providing them withheavier **outlines** that separate them from the background.
41. Probably because viewers have learned to expect heavier objects to sink, the **bottom** of a picture usually suggests more weight than the top. Thus, artists can make meaningful advantage out of the discomfort viewers tend to feel when heavier figures or more action appears in the **top** half of a picture.
42. Pictorial perception tends to follow the direction of a viewer's main language—so English speakers tend to read or make sense of pictures as if they move from **left to right**.
43. Mercedes Gaffron suggests that pictures contain a **glance curve**--that viewers look at the figures on the lower left first, and then move their eyes in a curve to the upper right. Because viewers often understand the first figure as most central, the main characters in many narrative pictures appear on the lower left, and the characters they struggle with on the upper right.
44. As with the overall effects of predominating colors, the **colors of specific objects** provide information about those objects. The mere fact that objects are in colors that stand out gives them weight. Viewers tend to focus on one white object in a field of otherwise somber colors, or on bright objects in a darker space.
45. Artist can also imply **relationships** between objects of the same or similar colors.
46. Pictures that represent a three-dimension space that appears to exist behind their surface on the other side of the surface of the paper imply relationships within the implied space. The diagonal lines that create the sense of depth in **perspective** drawing act like arrows focusing attention on the objects they lead toward and allow artists to give greater visual weight to small figures.
47. Viewers understand events differently when they see them from different **points of view**. Characters who are seen from below look large and isolated from their backgrounds--against empty skies or ceilings--and seem to be alone and in control of their situations. But characters we look down on from above might seem trapped by their backgrounds or comfortably secure in them.
48. As in movies, variation in **focus** also affects the way viewers respond to a scene. **Long shots**, which show characters surrounded by environment, emphasize the figures' relationship with places and other people, their social situation. **Close-ups** of character's faces tend to make viewers focus on private feelings. **Middle-distance shots**, showing objects or characters within but not dwarfed by settings, suggest a balance between intimacy and distance.
49. In perspective drawings, the spaces that depictions of objects occupy on the page interfere with or **overlap** each other. Artists can use overlapping to suggest the relationships of the objects they depict, implying that one object or figure dominates or has a close relationship to another; and conversely, lack of overlapping implies a lack of relationship.
50. The light implied by pictures may come from sources both inside and outside the pictures. An actual **light source** depicted in a picture draws attention both to itself and to what it casts light on. An implied light from the rear of a picture places characters in front of it in shadow. and might make then seem troubled or evil; an implied light lighting up a character's face or the front surface of or object might suggest importance or happiness. Viewers expect light to fall from above, and therefore variations from this convention create an atmosphere of strange mystery.
51. The characters in pictures often form what stage directors call **stage pictures**: they are "blocked"--that is, given positions in relation to each other that imply their social or emotional relationships. Viewers' consciously or unconsciously assume that the characters' positions and gestures do in fact convey

information about the events they are taking part in and their responses to it--just as good staging does in the theater.

52. A picture is fixed and traditionally, can show only one moment separated from the flow of time. Several conventions allow artist to suggest **movement**.
53. An artist can suggest activity by choosing to depict a moment when an action isn't complete; an **incomplete action** invites viewers to imagine its completion. For instance, walking involves moments when the feet are on the floor and moments when they are off it; but since feet on the floor seem to be at rest, an artist wishing to depict a character walking would have to show one foot off the ground. (Consider the waling figure in Alex Coville's *Atlantic Limited*.)
54. Viewers tend to complete the lines in pictures by imagining them to extend beyond their depicted length. **Linear continuance** can be used to suggest that an object is continuing to move on the path existing shapes and lines imply.
55. The **action lines** used by cartoonists create a similar effect. By echoing the line of an arm or a foot three or four times, these lines invite viewers to fill the space in between and imagine a continuous movement. Likewise, many lines radiating out from a central point imply explosive activity.
56. Certain forms of **distortion**—enlarged hands or feet, bullet-shaped heads—also suggest movement forward or backward, etc.
57. If people tend to look at pictures from left to right, then tend to assume that **time passes from left to right**--that what happens on the left of a picture happens *before* what happens on the right. As a result, we conventionally assume that characters and objects might be in motion when they point toward the right and tend to feel uncomfortable and assume that the motion is difficult or impeded when they face toward the left (consider the train in Covilles *Atlantic Limited*.) The reverse might be true in say, paintings by speakers of Hebrew.)
58. Some pictures make use of what Joseph Schwarcz calls **continuous narrative***;* they show the same character or object in a number of different poses within the same picture, each pose representing one moment out of a series of connected actions, moving in time from left to right. (Cubist pictures seem to be operating in this way.)
59. The most obvious way in which pictures can convey the passage of time is simply by counting on viewers' knowledge that they are meant to show part of a story. When viewers understand that, they tend to explore the picture for information about what it *doesn't* actually show--they consider what might have happened to lead up to the situation and what might be the result of it.
60. In depicting human interactions (or even the interactions of abstract shapes) artists must choose which moment to show out of the many possible ones that make up an action. As well as implying what happens before and after them, the **specific moments chosen** takes on particular significance and strongly influences the way the events actions implied are understood.

Context

61. Pictures become meaningful not just in terms of what they depict or how they depict it, but also in terms of the **contexts** we understand them to relate to and be part of. Those contexts can include:
62. The **didactic** labels attached to them.
63. Their **position** in relationship to each other in a room in a gallery;
64. Their relationship to the name of the **exhibit** they appear in.
65. A viewers' **knowledge** of the artist's career, of art history, of the implications of various kinds and schools and movements in art and of other specific works a picture might be responding to or have another relationship with. Knowledge of any or all of these contexts might draw viewers' attention to specific details of pictures and cause them to interpret the details in specific ways.
66. An equally significant context consists of the ideas, the tastes, and the personality that a **specific viewer** brings to a picture and interprets it with. Responses to pictures and interpretations of them emerge from the interactions of a picture's contexts and a viewer's contexts.

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