

Excerpts from Introduction to *How to Look at Japanese Art* by Stephen Addiss, Harry N. Abrams, 1996. Pages 7–11

Although books and illustrations can certainly help us to understand art, seeing the objects firsthand is vital. Many museums in America have notable collections of Japanese art. Going with a friend can be helpful, since four eyes see more than two. Discussing the works that you see together is a good way to explore your thoughts and impressions – and it is always fascinating to know how different people can view the same works of art. But going alone is also important, since it gives you the time to absorb each work at your own pace, and to consider how your own background and personality interact with your impressions of the art.

There are other ways to deepen your reception of art. One method is to stand in front of a work, take in as many aspects as possible, then turn around and try to recreate the work in your mind's eye. Turn back; have you missed something? Try again, each time you will and absorb new aspects of the art.

Another useful method is to take sketches of what you see. This does not require artistic skill, since a very rough sketch is enough to help you determine whether the work is busy or spacious, serene or dynamic, curving or angular, and naturalistic, or idealistic.

Sketches can also be made in words. How would you describe the work to someone who has not seen it? What if you were to write a short essay about the work? Putting ideas to paper can be very helpful; the book *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* by Sylvan Barnet has many good ideas in this regard.

When you face a work of art, you can ask questions; Why was the work made? What was its use? Was it intended for religious purposes? For decoration? For practical needs? To express delight, sorrow, or mystery? To communicate an individual vision, or a group's beliefs? Or simply to exist?

Study of the culture will certainly help you answer these questions, but your personal responses are also valuable, because they bring life to objects from the past. Art is a process, always changing, and always enlivened by fresh vision and honest responses.

Once we have discovered which works of art can intrigue, move, and ultimately illuminate us, we often make them our favorites. But while it is good to revisit works that you already like, it is also valuable to spend time with art that you have not known before. Some works have an instant appeal, but you can gradually expand your range to examine works that may have different, perhaps more subtle, aesthetic qualities.

The most important point is to look, not only with your eyes but also with your mind. Art tells us about all the different things it means to be human, in every country, in every period. If we look more fully, our pleasure and our understanding can be greatly enhanced. If we truly learn to see, Japanese art can become a joyful and transforming experience.