

Artful Insights

By Rena Tobey

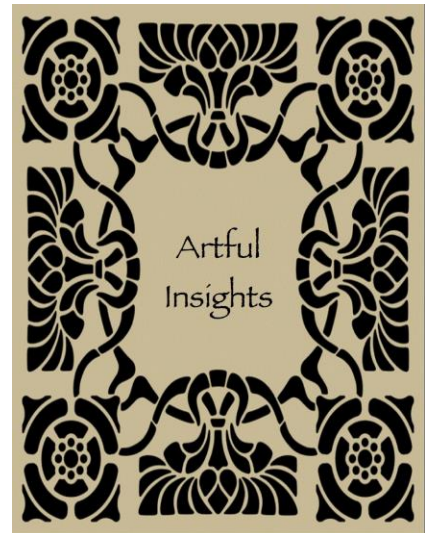
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Looking at art has long been a source for inspiration, joy, and intrigue. After 9-11, art also became a place of refuge and re-grounding for me. As I studied to become an art historian, I found satisfaction in drawing others into the pleasures of art, taking away any remnants of pretension by helping them recognize their own ability to see.

I provide talks on art and tours of museums, and the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut allowed me to use selected works from their collection to try out a new program. In it, volunteers from the group thought of a problem they were encountering. They then randomly drew a slip of paper from a (literal) hat. The paper named and showed an artwork. We then gathered around the piece and, with guided questioning, the person let the art resolve their problem. It was a magical experience, and with the resulting intense intimacy, the person gained a sense of ownership for that work.

Watching people's resolved tension and personal connection grow sparked the idea for the oracle deck Artful Insights. The deck features 135 cards, each with a reproduction of a masterwork, which can be used with any spread. The deck does not follow the tarot structure of Major and Minor Arcana, although tarot readers may recognize some overlap in meaning.

Reading with Artful Insights focuses on the artworks themselves and building a relationship between the querent and the art. I use a slow-looking method that builds on how the querent sees the work, then layers in information such as the meaning of symbols, the cultural and historical context, and the background of the artist. Whatever might be relevant to the querent's question becomes part of the answering experience.



Tarot readers might find a connection between Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, painted in 1818, and the 2 of Wands. Both suggest a contemplative person considering a world beyond.



Querents have read this setting in various ways. One saw thunderous waves crashing against a rocky coast; another imagined a lunar landscape. The title suggests fog, but the viewer's experience is key.

A painter during the Romantic era, Friedrich explores the relationship of humans to nature. He shows a figure on top of the world, whatever that world may be. The Romantics were interested in being seekers, asking emotional and spiritual questions with no easy answers.

We are not allowed access to the man's face, allowing us to project ourselves into his experience, his seeking. We become the figure on the rocky precipice. What does that feel like? Your interpretation says something about how you are experiencing the problem.

Mary Cassatt painted *In the Loge* in 1878. Also called *At the Opera*, this painting comments on the nature of looking. Notice that not only does the central figure hold binoculars, but so does a man around the curve to the other end of the balcony. He is gazing at her.

During this time, women were not readily given the freedoms men had to engage with the public world of business, politics, and entertainment. A genteel woman like Cassatt, unlike her friend and artist Edgar Degas, did not have access to backstage at the theater or the bars of the Paris nightlife. She would have been limited to chaperoned events such as attending the opera. Being outside the home still provided her a chance to look, to really see a world beyond her limited domestic setting. The ability to look is a right and a skill she is acquiring here.



The right to lingeringly gaze at beautiful women has been given to men since the invention of art. Here, Cassatt equalizes the power, providing this woman the agency, equal to the man in the scene. The ability to look is a statement of personal power.

The painter's life story may be relevant to the querent, too. Cassatt was born into a wealthy Philadelphia family, and societal expectations on her were clear. Defying convention, she moved to Paris to develop her skills as an artist. Her talent was so prodigious, even as her subject matter was limited to the private sphere of women and children, that she was readily accepted into the art avant garde. Her voice was appreciated and celebrated in a more bohemian atmosphere.

Knowing the artist biography, the social constraints on women in the period, and the ways those restrictions were being challenged add layers of meaning to an image that on the surface is about a pleasant evening at the theater. Applying this background information can help the querent find new insights about the presenting question.

The cards can get quite complex and symbolically rich. In 1818, Théodore Géricault painted *The Raft of the Medusa* based on a historical event. We start by taking in the image. At the Louvre Museum, the painting is enormous, pounding the viewer with the larger-than-life-sized figures in this desperate situation. Even on the card, the anguish of the scene can be overwhelming. The querent can take time to look deeply. What is happening here? Does the querent identify with any of the figures?

Together, we can explore how Géricault created the scene. Look at how he has knotted the figures together to form a triangle of writhing limbs and pointing arms. Your eye moves all around taking in the individual experiences—the father mourning his dead son, a man shouting for attention over the screaming wind, two men waving clothes to attract the attention of a tiny ship on the horizon. Is the gesture futile?

Take a moment to hear the painting, smell the spray of the salt water, experience the chaos. How does that sensory information inform answers to the presenting question? Like Friedrich, Géricault was a Romantic era painter, interested in the heightened emotion of experience, the extremes of the human situation. What does the painter want the viewer to feel?

Knowing the history of the scene adds more information. The Medusa, captained by an inexperienced political appointee, was headed to Senegal when it shipwrecked both off course and about 60 miles away from shore. The frigate's six lifeboats could not accommodate all those on board. The remaining 147, including one woman, turned to a hastily constructed raft to be towed behind one of the boats. But the raft was released after only a few miles.



With little sustenance available, those on the raft began to suffer. They turned on each other with violence, committed suicide, and resorted to cannibalism. Rescued by chance after 13 days, only 15 survived. The painting shows this moment of death, despair, and hope.

The event took place only two years before the painting was made. Géricault interviewed survivors and depicted the horrors they described with the accuracy of first-hand accounts.

The incident was well publicized, and the painting was used as a political tool to embarrass the French monarchy, held responsible for the appointment of the inept and vilified captain.

The artist's political leanings can be interpreted through his sympathetic portrayals of the men on the raft and his abolitionist views, noted by placing an African man at the apex of the triangle, heroically signaling for rescue. Even in this apparently powerless situation, a black man symbolically rises to the top, proclaiming his humanity and demanding notice.

The painting continues to exert a horrid fascination for viewers. What does the querent respond to in the scene? What does the background story add to the querent's understanding? Does the querent relate to themes such as injustice, courage, brutality, desperation, grief? How do those insights inform the presenting question?

Hopefully these examples demonstrate how Artful Insights works as a reading tool. Not only do querents gain insights about their question, but they also develop a sense of ownership about artworks in the reading.

Because the images represent famous masterpieces, I encourage them to continue to work with the image. Create computer, tablet, or phone wallpaper with the image that has the most resonance or from a picture of the spread from the reading. Revisit the image, meditate upon it, reinforce learnings, and discover new insights. That artwork will always belong to the querent and that moment of insightful connection. What an opportunity to own a work of art.

For more information, contact:

Rena Tobey

rena@renatobey.com

917-692-2829 cell

www.renatobey.com/artful-insights/