

# Visual Thinking Strategies in Museological Practice: Towards a Dialogical Model of Interpretation

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## *Visual Thinking Strategies in Museological Practice: Towards a Dialogical Model of Interpretation*

This article examines the theoretical and practical implications of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in contemporary museological practice. Positioned against traditional models of curatorial authority, VTS introduces a dialogical and participatory approach to interpretation based on collective visual inquiry. By encouraging open-ended observation and discussion, VTS reshapes the relationship between visitors, objects, and institutional narratives. Drawing on international examples, the paper argues that VTS reflects a broader shift in museology toward inclusivity, co-creation, and the decentralization of expert authority.

Keywords: Visual Thinking Strategies, museums, art-viewing behaviours, cultural heritage

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant trend in museological practice towards a transformation of interpretive practices, moving away from traditional, authoritative models towards more inclusive and participatory approaches. While the traditional model privileged curatorial authority and the transmission of expert knowledge, contemporary museology increasingly emphasizes the active role of the visitor in meaning-making processes.<sup>1</sup> Within this context, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) have emerged as a significant method, enabling dialogical and participatory interpretation of museum objects.<sup>2</sup> The theoretical foundations and practical applications of Visual Thinking Strategies in contemporary museum contexts are a current and multi-threaded topic. Originally developed as an educational method to enhance critical thinking and literacy in visual language, VTS has gained increasing importance in museums as a tool that facilitates dialogic engagement between visitors, objects and institutional narratives.

The Visual Thinking Strategies approach was developed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Phillip Yeanawine. VTS is a tool that deepens the user's ability to search for the meaning of images. Its genesis dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, when

<sup>1</sup> BURNHAM, R., KAI-KEE, E. *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> YENAWINE, P. *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013.

Housen conducted numerous interviews with people viewing artwork to understand how their visual thinking process developed.<sup>3</sup> The results of this research led to the formulation of a theory of aesthetic development<sup>4</sup> which proposes that the ability to understand and interpret images is not innate but develops through systematic, guided practice.<sup>5</sup> Housen's collaboration with Yenawine in the 1990s transformed these theoretical findings into practical teaching tools that were quickly adopted in museums.<sup>6</sup>

Visual Thinking Strategies is a method that encourages people to observe, think, and articulate their thoughts about visual images. In museum studies, it is a visitor-centred approach that uses a given methodology to deepen knowledge about possible fields of interpretation and provides multi-threaded opportunities for perceiving cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> In sharp contrast to conventional curatorial authority – where interpretation is often unidirectional and expert-led – VTS promotes a collaborative process based on collective visual inquiry. By inviting visitors to observe closely, express their own perspectives and engage in open discussions, VTS challenges the hierarchical dynamics traditionally embedded in museum interpretation. This dialogic model not only empowers audiences as active participants in meaning-making, but also encourages museums to reconsider the role of expertise and authority in shaping visitor experiences.<sup>8</sup>

## Models of interpretation in museology

Traditional models of interpretation in museology focus on the top-down transmission of knowledge, with the museum acting as an authoritative entity that decides on the meaning and context of objects. This model, known as museum as authority, was dominant for many years, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Curators and experts were seen as the primary decision-makers regarding what and how to present, while audiences were treated as passive consumers of this information. This approach is based on the belief that the museum, as a cultural institution, has a monopoly on the interpretation of the past. A characteristic feature of traditional interpretation in museums is hierarchical – the power in the process of creating a narrative is concentrated in the hands of curators and institutions. Exhibits in a museum are presented in a way that aims to convey predetermined information, often through textual descriptions that rarely engage the viewer in deeper reflection. There is also a tendency for the narrative to be authoritative, which limits the possibilities for visitors to interact with objects. In this traditional model, the museum is seen primarily as a depository of objects rather than a place of interaction or reflection.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> HOUSEN, A. *The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development*. EdD Thesis. Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> HOUSEN, A. Validating a Measure of Aesthetic Development for Museums and Schools. In: *ILVS (International Laboratory for Visitor Studies) Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, 2 (2), 1992, pp. 213-237.

<sup>5</sup> HOUSEN, A. Voices of viewers: Iterative research, theory and practice. In: *Arts and Learning Research Journal*, 17(1), 2001, pp. 2-12.

<sup>6</sup> MAYER, M. M. Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide in Contemporary Art Museum Education. In: *Art Education*, 58(2), 2005, pp. 13-17.

<sup>7</sup> DEWEY, J. Imagination and Expression. In: *Teachers College Bulletin*, 10(10), 1919, pp. 7-15.

<sup>8</sup> RICE, D., YENAWINE P. A Conversation on Object-Centered Learning in Art Museums. In: *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 45(4), 2002, pp. 289-303.

<sup>9</sup> DAY, J. D., FRENCH, L., HALL, L.K. *Metacognition, cognition, and human performance*. New York: Academic Press, 1985.

The paradigm shift in museology that occurred under the influence of postmodernism and the critique of classical power hierarchies introduced new approaches to interpretation in museums. Postmodernism, through its critique of authority, objectivity and grand narratives, raises the question of the subjectivity of interpretation, challenging the traditional model in which the museum plays the role of unquestionable authority. According to postmodern theories, museum narratives should not be one-dimensional but rather allow for multiple perspectives and interpretations.<sup>10</sup> The concept of cultural relativism emphasizes that history and culture are not fixed objects to be acquired but changing and context-dependent constructs. In the context of museology, this shift has had an impact on the democratization of the museum space. Museums have begun to pay more attention to how they involve visitors in the process of creating meaning. Instead of treating visitors as passive recipients of information, museums have begun to see them as active participants in the process of interpretation. Participatory approaches to exhibitions emerged, promoting dialogue and the co-creation of meaning rather than just the one-way transfer of knowledge.

In this context, it is worth examining two key communication theories that have influenced the development of dialogical methods of interpretation in museums. The first is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogical communication.<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin postulated that dialogue is a fundamental form of human interaction in which meaning is created through exchange, rather than through the imposition of a single, unchanging point of view. According to this concept, every conversation, as well as every encounter with a work of art, should be based on a shared construction of meaning, rather than a one-way transmission. The second key theorist who influenced the change in approach to museum interpretation was Paulo Freire. Freire, known for his work on liberation pedagogy, emphasized critical thinking and active participation in the educational process. For Freire, education should be a dialogical process in which the teacher and the student (or in the context of a museum, the curator and the visitor) co-create meaning. This approach assumes that true understanding occurs when those involved in the interpretation process can express their opinions and experiences, resulting in the joint creation of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

These changes are leading to the development of a new approach in museology that places the visitor at the centre of the interpretive process. Visitor-centred museology is an approach that emphasises the experience and engagement of visitors, recognising them as co-creators of meaning.<sup>13</sup> The shift from an authoritarian museum to a participatory museum means that curators are no longer just custodians of knowledge but also facilitators of the interpretive process. In this context, visitors are not just passive observers but active participants who interpret objects based on their own experiences, knowledge and perspectives. The increased role of the visitor in the interpretive process has led to the growing importance of interactive museological practice and interpretive methods, such as Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), which promote dialogue and collaboration, as well as creating space for a plurality of voices and experiences.

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<sup>10</sup> BENNETT, T. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> BAKHTIN, M. M. Holquist, M. (ed). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. University of Texas Press, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> FREIRE, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, E. *Museums and Their Visitors*. Oxton: Routledge, 1994.

## Visual Thinking Strategies in museology: theoretical background

The VTS method follows a process that unfolds in three main stages: observation, interpretation and argumentation. First, participants are invited to observe an artwork closely, focusing on specific details that might otherwise be overlooked. This initial careful observation forms the foundation for interpretation,<sup>14</sup> where participants share their personal insights and meanings derived from the visual evidence.<sup>15</sup> Finally, argumentation encourages participants to support their interpretations by pointing to concrete visual elements, fostering evidence-based reasoning and critical dialogue. This iterative cycle transforms passive viewing into an active collaborative inquiry that cultivates critical thinking and respects diverse perspectives.

Central to the VTS approach is the role of the moderator, who facilitates discussion by asking carefully crafted open-ended questions such as “What’s going on in this picture?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?”. These questions invite participants to engage deeply with the artwork and with each other’s viewpoints, while the moderator remains neutral, avoiding imposition of authoritative interpretations. This creates a safe, judgment-free environment conducive to open dialogue and multiple interpretations (Table 1). The moderator’s paraphrasing of participant responses further validates contributions and encourages ongoing participation, which contrasts with traditional museum mediation that often privileges expert narratives.<sup>16</sup> The cognitive foundations of VTS are based on the concept of visual thinking and the development of aesthetic sensitivity.<sup>17</sup> This method supports the development of visual competence, which is necessary in an increasingly visual world,<sup>18</sup> and also promotes the development of critical thinking and communication skills.

**Table 1:** Table illustrating the main actions of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in museums, based on established VTS procedures and educational goals.

Activity	Description	Goal and outcome
<b>Observation</b>	Participants quietly observe the artwork for 1–2 minutes without reading labels or descriptions.	Develop focus and independent visual analysis skills.
<b>Open-ended questions</b>	Facilitator asks three core questions: “What’s going on in this picture?”, “What do you see that makes you say that?”, and “What more can we find?”	Stimulate critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning and detailed observation.
<b>Active listening and paraphrasing</b>	Facilitator listens carefully, paraphrases participants’ comments and points to specific areas in the artwork as they speak.	Validate participants’ contributions and foster a supportive dialogue.

<sup>14</sup> JOSEPHSON, S.; KELLY, J.; SMITH, K. *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> RODRIGUES, J. Get More Eyes on Your Work: Visual Approaches for Dissemination and Translation of Education Research. In: *Educational Researcher*, 50(9), 2021. pp. 657–663.

<sup>16</sup> BACHMANN, C. Theory and Practice of Visual Thinking Strategies in Upper Secondary Education. *Forum Oświatowe*, 34(1), 2022. pp. 105-121.

<sup>17</sup> DEBES, J.; FRANSECKY, R. *Visual Literacy: A Way to Learn: A Way to Teach*. Washington, DC: Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> DEBES, J. L. The Loom of Visual Literacy: An Overview. In: *Audiovisual Instruction*, 14(8), 1969. pp. 25–27.

<b>Connecting different views</b>	Facilitator links related or contrasting comments to highlight multiple perspectives.	Encourage collaboration and multifaceted understanding.
<b>Co-constructing meaning</b>	Participants collectively build interpretations, feeling like co-authors of the meaning.	Democratize access to knowledge and increase engagement.
<b>Reflection and skill development</b>	Post-session reflection helps participants develop observation, argumentation, empathy and critical thinking skills.	Promote long-term growth in visual literacy and communication.

### Visual Thinking Strategies in museology: practical implications

Visual Thinking Strategies was introduced into museum practice at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the 1990s by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine. The method was created as a response to the need to increase visitor engagement and develop visitors' critical thinking and observation skills through active dialogue around works of art. The implementation of VTS at MoMA marked a significant change in the approach to museum visits – a shift from the traditional, lecture-based model of knowledge transfer to a dialogical one based on open discussion. Instead of imposing an “objective” interpretation by the curator, participants in VTS sessions are encouraged to formulate observations themselves and argue them based on visual evidence contained in the work. The design of the process promotes not only the development of observation and argumentation skills but also empathy and cooperation in the group, because participants feel like co-authors of the interpretation, not just passive recipients of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The implementation of VTS at MoMA was a breakthrough in museological practice, introducing a dialogical process that activates participants, develops their visual and critical competences, and builds a sense of co-creation of knowledge about art. Research conducted within the Visual Thinking Curriculum (VTC), based on the MoMA collection, has shown that students participating in the program achieve statistically significant increases in their ability to reason based on visual evidence.<sup>20</sup> The mean evidential reasoning score of the experimental group increased by approximately 20%.<sup>21</sup> The VTS programme at MoMA was designed to engage visitors in active discussion, which translates into the development of observation skills, argumentation and empathy.

Visual Thinking Strategies programs have been implemented at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona since 2012. The first research conclusions indicate that the VTS method is perceived as a valuable tool that promotes dialogue and critical thinking, but requires appropriate preparation by educators and adaptation to the museum context.<sup>22</sup> Research conducted on a

<sup>19</sup> HEILIG, J. V.; COLE, H.; AGUILAR, A. From Dewey to No Child Left Behind: The evolution and devolution of public arts education. In: *Arts Education Policy Review*, 111(4), 2010, pp. 136–145.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> TISHMAN, S., MacGILLIVRAY, D., PALMER, P. *Investigating the educational impact and potential of the Museum of Modern Art's Visual Thinking Curriculum: Final report*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard Project Zero, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> GONZÁLEZ-SANZ, M., FELIU-TORRUELLA, M., CARDONA-GÓMEZ, M., G. Visual Thinking Strategies from the perspective of museum educators: A SWOT analysis of the practical implementation of the method. In: *Revista de Educacion*, 375, 2017, pp. 153-175.

group of 477 primary school students showed significant benefits associated with this method.<sup>23</sup> Students indicated increased engagement during their visit to the museum and a preference for learning based on dialogue and the observation of works of art. Moreover, most of them expressed a desire to use similar methods in the future, which indicates a positive reception and highlights the effectiveness of VTS as a tool in museology. Participants appreciated the opportunity to actively participate in the interpretation process and express their own opinions and observations, which helped develop critical thinking skills and independent visual analysis. At the same time, some students drew attention to the need to take into account more historical and artistic content during VTS sessions, which indicates the potential for further development and integration of the method with traditional elements of museum education. A study published in 2023, highlighted that students preferred teaching methods that were based on active participation and dialogue, although over 40% of them indicated that the optimal solution would be to combine a discussion-based approach with lecture elements. In conclusion, the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona effectively engaged young audiences and adapted the program to the expectations and needs of many visitors.<sup>24</sup>

The project *Pensa a voce alta* [Think out loud] implemented by VTSItalia in 2021 in the Lazio region in Italy, is another example of the successful implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies in museological practice.<sup>25</sup> The program involved three secondary schools and two national museums in the province of Rome, combining school classes with practical experience in the museum. As part of the project, students prepared for their visit to the museum through special classes at school aimed at developing their skills in observation and visual analysis. Then, during their visit to the museum, they led discussions based on the VTS method with selected works of art. This two-level structure allowed participants not only to actively engage in the interpretation of the works but also to deepen their understanding of the dialogical process that is key to VTS. One of the tangible effects of the project was the students' own descriptions of the works of art, which were shared with other museum visitors. This solution not only strengthens the sense of co-creation of knowledge, but also promotes the museum as a space for dialogue and community, where the voice of each participant matters. The research and observations carried out during the project showed a high level of student engagement and understanding of the goals and values of VTS. The project has had a positive impact on the perception of museums as places open to diverse interpretations and active participation, and as institutions which favor inclusiveness and education based on dialogue.<sup>26</sup> In conclusion, the *Pensa a voce alta* project represents a model implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies. It combines school education with museological practice, developing visual competences and critical thinking while building a culture of dialogue and cooperation in the museum environment.

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<sup>23</sup> GONZÁLEZ-SANZ, M., WILSON-DAILY, A. E., FELIU-TORRUELLA, M., IBANEZ-ETXEBERRIA, A. What type of learning methods do pupils prefer in museums and at school? Elementary school pupils' perceptions of Visual Thinking Strategies as applied at the Barcelona Picasso Museum. In: *SAGE Open*, 13(4), 2023, pp. 1–13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem

<sup>25</sup> COLIZZI M.A., CECI F., MICELI F., TROIANO M., FERRARA V. Think out loud: A Visual Thinking Strategies experience for students in museums, In: *Proceedings of the 8th International Visual Methods Conference*, 2024, pp. 86-94.

<sup>26</sup> BADINO M. (ed). *Beyond the two cultures. Experiences from a POT project*. Trento: Erickson, University & Research, 2022.

As part of the research project Making Museum Collections Culturally Accessible: A Training Activity for Professionals at the National Roman Museum, which ran in 2024 and 2025, Museo Nazionale Romano museum educators received specialized training in Visual Thinking Strategies aimed at improving their competency in communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking.<sup>27</sup> This training enabled staff to engage visitors more effectively and design educational activities that were more inclusive and accessible to different audiences, including those at risk of social exclusion. The training cycle involved museum staff, who participated in workshops sessions conducted both in the museum space and online. After completing the training, participants showed improvement in their critical analysis skills when approaching works of art compared to the level before the training, which was confirmed by evaluations conducted using competency tests and self-assessment surveys.<sup>28</sup> In addition, most participants reported increased job satisfaction and a sense of meaningfulness at work, indicating the positive impact of VTS on their daily responsibilities. As a result of implementing VTS, the museum was able to develop new educational programs that better meet the needs of people with disabilities and other marginalized groups. These programs include elements of dialogue and participation which help build a sense of community and openness in the museum space. Qualitative research has shown that visitors are more willing to engage in discussions and feel more invited to actively participate in the interpretation of collections. To sum up, the Making Museum Collections Culturally Accessible project at the National Roman Museum is an example of the effective use of Visual Thinking Strategies to improve the quality of museum exhibitions, increase cultural accessibility and strengthen staff competences, which translates into more inclusive and engaging visitor experiences.

An interesting case proving that museums can play a key role in responding to real social needs is presented by the National Gallery of Canada. During the 2025 Museums, Health and Wellbeing Summit, Andrea Gumpert, an art educator from the National Gallery of Canada, and Jessica Remedios, a healthcare expert from Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), presented reflections from a collaborative project that used Visual Thinking Strategies as a tool to support teamwork and improve communication. For museums seeking to expand their influence, such collaborations are an inspiring model of action. In an era where institutions are constantly searching for new forms of community engagement, such projects remind us that museums are not only places to store heritage and art, but also active centres of learning, change and development. During The National Gallery of Canada's collaboration with Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), VTS was used to strengthen soft skills and team building in the interdisciplinary neurodevelopmental health team. Over the course of six months, 15 VTS sessions were held with 101 participants, conducted in three formats: i) directly in the gallery with original works of art, ii) in hospital rooms using digital reproductions and iii) virtually via Zoom.<sup>29</sup> Each session was based on three VTS key questions: "What is happening in this picture?", "What do you see that makes you say that?" and "What else can we find?" Analysis of the results before and after the sessions revealed statistically significant improvements in observation skills, particularly in the use of reasoning based on visual evidence, objective

<sup>27</sup> TORRE, E. M. Making Museum Collections Culturally Accessible: A Training Activity for Professionals at the National Roman Museum. In: *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning (iJAC)*, 18(2), 2025, pp. 92–103.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96,97.

<sup>29</sup> RICHARDSON J. Visual Thinking Strategies for Healthcare Professionals at an Art Museum, In: *MuseumNext*, 2025. Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> June 2025, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/visual-thinking-strategies-for-healthcare-professionals-at-an-art-museum/>

observation and critical analysis. Although changes in communication attitudes and tolerance for uncertainty were not statistically significant, there was a tendency for participants working with original works in the gallery to appreciate the importance of effective communication more. Another significant effect of the VTS sessions was the “flattening” of professional hierarchies, which facilitated a freer exchange of ideas, listening to different perspectives and being open to different interpretations. These skills are crucial for effective collaboration in demanding medical environments. Participants emphasized that the VTS process encouraged them to slow down, listen actively and be open to different points of view, which translates into a better quality of patient care. This initiative shows that museums can play an important role in the development of competences, offering a neutral space for reflection, dialogue and team building. The VTS method used in National Gallery of Canada is an effective tool supporting the development of soft skills and cooperation in museological practice.

## Conclusion

Visual Thinking Strategies represent a significant step towards the democratization of museum spaces. This method shifts the emphasis from the traditional hierarchical role of the curator as the sole interpreter of works of art to the active participation of visitors in the process of creating meaning. When using VTS, each recipient, regardless of their level of knowledge or experience, has the opportunity to express their own interpretation, which promotes inclusiveness and diversity of perspectives. In this way, the museum ceases to be a mere depository of knowledge, instead becoming a place of dialogue and co-creation of culture. The implementation of VTS requires redefining the role of curators and museum guides. From the position of authority and transmitter of “objective” knowledge, they move to the role of moderators and facilitators of discussions who support the process of dialogue and exploration of works by visitors.

Multiple case studies demonstrate the effectiveness of VTS in diverse museum contexts. Research from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where VTS was first implemented in the 1990s, showed statistically significant improvements in visitor engagement. Similar positive outcomes have been observed at Museu Picasso in Barcelona, where students reported higher engagement and a preference for dialogue-based learning. The Italian project *Pensa a voce alta* integrated VTS with school curricula, fostering deep visitor engagement and a culture of dialogue within museum spaces. The National Roman Museum and National Gallery of Canada used Visual Thinking Strategies to improve staff skills and foster teamwork, showing museums’ role in promoting inclusion and collaboration. Of course, the introduction of this strategy to museum practice is associated with significant organizational and personal challenges. Specialist training is needed for educators and curators to prepare them to conduct dialogue based on this method. In addition, VTS sessions are time-consuming and require appropriate planning, which may conflict with traditional tour formats. This method has great potential as a tool supporting the inclusiveness of museum narratives. By enabling diverse social groups to actively participate in the interpretation of works, this method helps to break the dominant, often one-dimensional cultural narratives. VTS also helps to increase access to museum education for people from different backgrounds, including those with limited access to traditional art education, which is in line with the broader goals of democratization and openness of cultural institutions. It is worth continuing to do researches on the effectiveness of VTS in various cultural and social contexts to better understand how this method can

be adapted to the specificity of local audiences. Although VTS opens up new possibilities for museums, a question remains as to whether every institution is ready and able to fully implement the dialogical model. This requires not only resources and training, but also a change in organizational culture and openness to diversity of interpretations. Nevertheless, striving for a dialogical model of interpretation in museum practice seems to be a valuable approach, especially for museums that strive for lively social interactions and an extensive educational role.

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