

[Studio of Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XV*, after 1715]

How does art communicate a message?

What is the purpose of a portrait? Portraits can be true to life or depict the subjects as they wish to be seen by using expressions, body language, clothing, and props to affect the way we view a person. Try looking at this portrait without reading the title. What does this portrait tell you about this person? Why was the portrait made? What can we learn just from looking at this painting? Start with a simple description: A person sits on a chair. How is he dressed? What does he look like? He wears a large cloak with a chain across his neck, and his hair falls past his shoulders in gray curls. How is he posed? His right hand holds a metal staff, while he points outside the frame of the image by extending his left arm and index finger. He looks out of the picture in the same direction. His left leg sticks out from the cloak, and his foot turns out on the edge of a cushion. What other details can you find? A crown and another metal staff rest on a table next to the chair. Fabric of the same color and pattern covers the chair and table. The pattern is repeated on his cloak and the cushion at his feet. The person, chair, and table sit on top of a stepped platform covered by a carpet. A fabric backdrop with red and gold on either side hangs behind the person and partially covers a column on the right edge of image.

Look closely at the passage above. What inferences, or information that is interpreted from visual details, can you find in the description? What other

inferences can you make? The round object on the table is identified as a crown. From here, the chair becomes a throne and the person royalty. The royal person's small stature, soft and plump hands, and delicate features suggest he is a child. His cloak's size in proportion to his body contributes to this inference (or jump to a conclusion). The left side of his cloak would hang off of his arm once unfolded.

Where is this person from?

Other components of the image, such as the props and patterns, tell the viewer the national identity of the royal person. The staff held by the ruler and the crown are topped with the same three-pronged flower shape that covers upholstery and appears in an alternating pattern on the chain worn by the person—the symbol is the fleur-de-lis, a symbol of France. The young king of France is depicted seated on his throne. Our observation skills and prior knowledge about the regalia of royalty help us understand the subject of the painting. Based on the information presented so far, what is the purpose of the portrait? What message does the portrait send?

What message would a noble person in eighteenth-century France see?

What was the context, or situation, behind the portrait's creation? Born in 1710, Louis XV was an orphan at age two and succeeded his great-grandfather Louis XIV, the "Sun King." Louis XIV reigned for seventy-two years; Louis XV became king at the age of five. Many courtiers spread rumors that Louis's regent, Philippe, duc d'Orléans, had poisoned members of Louis's family to get closer to the throne. To appease his critics, Orléans reversed many of Louis XIV's more unpopular policies. At the same time, he commissioned a portrait of the new king by Hyacinthe Rigaud, the old king's official court portraitist. Why do you think Orléans commissioned this portrait?

A French person would recognize the ceremonial clothing of the king. The chain is the "Order of the Holy Spirit." The staff in his hand is the scepter of rule; at his side, Charles V's "hand of justice" rests on the table. The "sword of Charlemagne" at his side completes the portrait of the king in his coronation regalia. The portrait was finished in 1717 but dated 1715—the year Louis XV became king. He had his coronation ceremony in 1722, seven years after becoming king. Why does this portrait depict him in clothing for a ceremony that had not taken place yet? How do you think an 18th-century French nobleperson would react to this painting?

What other factors influence the way we interpret this painting?

A museum wall label would tell today's viewer some of the information given above. How can written text change the way you look at a work of art?

Written texts can change the way we interpret the message of a painting that already includes substantial visual information. Writers may select which information fits their purpose best and leave out information that presents a different point of view. At the same time, people make connections to text based on their own knowledge and experience. How would a five-year-old interpret this painting? How would a politician interpret this painting? Compare their reactions to that of a professor of French history. What would be the similarities and differences in their interpretations of this painting's messages?

Hyacinthe Rigaud (French, 1659–1743)

Louis XIV, 1701

Oil on canvas, 109 x 76 1/3 in.

Louvre, Collection of Louis XIV

http://www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/detail_notice.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225142&CURRENT_LL_V_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=101341986

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Rigaud painted this portrait of King Louis XIV when the king was 63 years old. *What similarities and differences can you find between this portrait and the portrait of Louis XV? What type of person does Louis XIV's appear to be, based on his portrait? How would you describe his attitude and demeanor? What message is this portrait supposed to send?*