

# Cultural theory and images

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



Cultural Theory and Images: The three images perused for this exercise do provide the viewer with broad interpretative scope. When looked at without cognizant of the title or the context in which they were made, the range of possible meanings contained in them grows. Take, say, the imaged titled Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait with Spread Fingers*, 1911. Self portraits are usually either fair or flattering to the painter. But Schiele takes a non-reverential look at himself in projecting an emaciated and disfigured state. For the viewer unaware of this background, the painting might appear to be that of a leprosy patient whose condition is near terminal. This view is all the more plausible considering the visibility of only four fingers and the lack of symmetry between the two sides of the face – features that are characteristic of leprosy. The cultural background of the viewer will also bear on the impression gathered, for leprosy as a deadly disease is more common in tropical and sub-tropical climes. So, for a European-Caucasian viewer, the painting might speak of acute and terminal stages of tuberculosis. Equally credible is the interpretation that the depiction is that of a survivor in war, with his countenance damaged by a bomb blast.

The picture titled *Duck/Rabbit*, 1899 is quite interesting. For those now aware of the title, the first impression might be either that of a duck or a rabbit but not both. The observer, upon identifying the duck, might go on to study the finer details of the image, in terms of the size and shape of the brush strokes used. He/she might also look at the black and white contrast effectively employed by the painter. The same is applicable to the viewer who sees the rabbit first. But only upon disclosure of the title *Duck/Rabbit* would the viewer be pressed to find the other animal embedded within. The

cultural background of the viewer is bound to have a negligible effect on perception, for the subject is relatively simple and straightforward. The genius of the painter lay not so much in cultural sensibilities as in the clever imaginative conception of the mirror effect between the two animals.

The image Weegee, *Their First Murder*, 1941 is quite complex, in that, each individual in the photo gives a different expression. Some flinch as if in pain, while others show a hint of a smile, and some others just show curiosity, making singular interpretation a arduous task. The only adult in the image is the elegantly dressed lady, others are boys and girls of varying ages. But based on the dressing and hair styles worn one could deduce the image to be related to the Second World War. A cultural familiarity to this event is crucial for such an interpretation, for the writer is reminded of images from the film *Schindler's List*. According to this view, the picture could have been taken in the streets of an East European nation, as the Third Reich was sifting the population for Jews. A viewer from the Far East who is not acquainted with the European theatre of the war may remain clueless as to its image.

Hence, in conclusion, acclimatization to the culture of the artist and his/her work is important in getting a honest grasp of the image or painting. As the three images illustrated, the culture and milieu not only gives credence to an interpretation, but also offers vital information. Without this information not only would the lay observer be unable to interpret the visual properly but his/her appreciation of the work will also be limited.