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Adam Levine, assistant director at the Toledo Museum of Art.   
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**Conference at Toledo Museum of Art to explore ‘visual literacy’**

**Are we seeing, or are we just looking?**

**BY JANET ROMAKER  
BLADE STAFF WRITER**

Picture this:

Birth of a baby. Graduation party. Wedding. Anniversary dinner. Holidays with the family. Dance recitals. Sporting events. Prom. Dinner at a restaurant.

Photographs of special events and everyday life are being taken in record numbers, billions of them on smart phones, many of them shared instantly.

In this increasingly digital world, we sometimes focus more on images and less on text.

As the Toledo Museum of Art puts it “Words are so last millennium.”

“Our overtaxed brains, which process visual information 60,000 times faster than text, crave this new visual vocabulary,” according to the museum, where a conference will address such questions as: What does it all mean? How do you learn to speak visual and how do you leverage this phenomenon in the classroom and in the board room?

Innovators and experts will gather for candid conversation and share their perspectives on the visual phenom during the Art of Seeing: From Ordinary to Extraordinary at the 47th International Visual Literacy Association Conference Wednesday through Saturday at the museum.

It is the first time the conference has been held at a museum, said Adam Levine, assistant director of the museum.

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[**Enlarge**](http://www.toledoblade.com/image/2014/10/30/800x_b1_cCM_z/SOC-blockart04p-2.jpg)

Interestingly, and obviously not by coincidence, billboards in the city have been featuring images of people with [**DoYouSpeakVisual.com**](http://doyouspeakvisual.com/) as the tease from curiosity to website search. And that has started the conversation: People are seeing and talking and talking and seeing.

The International Visual Literacy Association, formed in 1969 to provide a forum for the exchange of information about visual literacy, is an association of researchers, educators, designers, media specialists, and artists. While definitions vary, in popular terms visual literacy is the ability to read and comprehend visual language. When we are visually literate we can read and use images as well as think and learn with images.

Visual literacy relates to how you use your eyes to not only see but to understand what you are looking at, said Brian Kennedy, director of the Toledo Museum of Art.

The world, he said, is in the middle of a revolution, a digital one, a world of screens and images.

“Anything you see is an image,” he said. “We think in text and pictures. In fact, everything you see is an image. A word is a picture,” he said, and visual literacy is not about learning how to write letters, but rather how to learn to read visual images. It’s about how we are going to train ourselves to use our eyes, he said, and part of the lesson is about slowing down and paying close attention to what our eyes see.

A recent study showed that visitors to an art museum spend 17 seconds looking at a work of art, he said.

“What happened to us to become so dismissive of the information that is being communicated pictorially that we don’t stop and pay attention?” he wondered.

And not just paying closer attention to objects such as art, but to each other — finding time, patience, and consideration to not just look but to see the world. “Teaching people how to do that is vital,” he said.

The Toledo Museum of Art is a fitting location for the international conference because of its emphasis on visual literacy, which is a key component of the organization’s strategic plan and incorporated in class offerings and docent training as well as to exhibition planning and public program design. The museum has a website dedicated to visual literacy, **vislit.org**.

Looking at works of art is one way to strengthen visual literacy skills. That’s because artists are skilled at visual language and visual storytelling, making their works rich sources of layered visual meaning, Kennedy said.

Visual literacy involves the development of critical-thinking skills as well as social and emotional skills, Levine said, noting the art museum is involved in a pilot project with Toledo Public Schools, launched in October, to see if visual literacy taught to preschool children makes a difference in how the youngsters see and relate to what they are learning in a world where there is a return to visual communication.

The world is image saturated because of what we carry in our pocket, Levine said, pulling out his smart phone, and that makes visual literacy an even more important skill today, he said.

You only take in 10 percent of what you see; 90 percent is filled in with memories, experiences, and biases, Levine added. By creating more deliberate seeing, people can become better informed, they can make better decisions, and they can develop empathy, he said, and ultimately, that can result in a better society.

*For more information about the conference, visit*[*vislit.org/​welcome*](http://vislit.org/%E2%80%8Bwelcome)*. Presentations by eight keynote speakers about the rise of visual language are free and open to the public. There is a fee to attend other conference sessions; to register, visit*[*vislit.org/​registration*](http://vislit.org/%E2%80%8Bregistration)*.*

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