

GUIDE FOR ANALYZING WORKS OF ART- SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

Keep in mind that interpretations of works of art should *first* proceed from visual analysis **toward** historical analysis; once you have a good grasp of the form, and have acquired historical information about the work of art, the process of understanding involves a constant interplay between formal and historical analysis.

Some of the questions about form and composition may seem very abstract, but they encourage an essential grounding in the image as a work of art. Cogent interpretations require skill in analyzing form, as well as historical and theoretical competence.

Regard the questions here as suggestions from which to choose whatever is useful in the special case that you are considering, and as aids in thinking up other pertinent questions. Making sketches of the work of art will help you to see it more fully. Your observations will provide you with basic material to shape into a readable comparison of works *in essay form*.

When describing and analyzing works of art, always note your first impressions. But remember that you must be able to justify your conclusions by observations that can be checked by others. Consider alternative choices that the artist might have made, and how they might have affected the character of the work. Compare a given work with others of the same subject or period and try to say what makes them different or similar. Remember: anything that is actually observable in the work of art is worth discussing.

SCULPTURE

IDENTIFICATION: [Keep in mind that this basic data may be very difficult to establish; even the brief data on the museum label may represent the fruit of painstaking historical investigation.]

1. Artist(s), if known, or anonymous.
2. Subject or title of the work.
3. Where it was made.
4. When it was made.
5. Present location (city + museum, collection or outdoor site)
6. Original location, if known.

TECHNICAL DATA

1. Size of the work: in giving dimensions, list height first.
2. Medium: from what material(s) is it constructed? Is it carved out of stone? Wood--if so, what kind? Modeled in clay and then cast in bronze or glazed? Welded metal? Other?
3. General condition: whole and undamaged? a fragment? worn? etc.
4. Display. Was the work meant to be seen on its own or as part of a complex sculptural or architectural setting? Free-standing? Mounted on a pedestal or base? Standing on ground? Against a wall? In a niche? (The wall label may not include all this information).

SUBJECT MATTER: What is shown? Abstract, or representational (depicting recognizable people, places, things)? *Take inventory of what is represented, beginning with the major motifs.* To which culture and/or belief system did the subject belong (the cult or myths of a particular tribe, clan, or court; the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament; classical literature; the lives of the saints; Renaissance literature; history; everyday life, etc.)?

If the human figure is represented, to what category does the person belong (deity; athlete; warrior; statesperson; private person; poet; philosopher; mythological figure, etc.)? Characterization: consider age; pose; movement; attire; body build; skin quality; facial expression; psychological focus; emphasis on anatomical or other parts; relationship of drapery or other clothing to the body? If a group of figures, also consider: physical and psychological relationships among the figures; movement from figure to figure--rhythmic, patterned, disjointed, etc.

FORMAL ANALYSIS: Sculpture

PREVAILING AXIS: Vertical; horizontal; diagonal; spiral?

VOLUMES: What kind of three-dimensional forms are basic to the sculpture? Geometric (conic; cubic; pyramidal, etc.)? Irregular (organic--lifelike; jagged; smooth)? A particular combination of the irregular and the geometric? How are these forms organized (including relative scale and proportion)?

SPACE: To what degree does the sculpture displace space? Do forms and surrounding space interpenetrate? Is it a relief that creates an illusion of space *within* it? Is the sculpture frontal? Does it turn in space? Was it meant to be seen from one point of view only, or from many?

LINE: How is line used in the sculpture? **Contour:** does the work have an open or closed silhouette? Are the dominant linear elements seen in the forms themselves, or are they incised onto the surface? What is the relationship between the linear and volumetric elements?

COLOR: Is color or gilding added to the sculpture? Is the color of the material of special importance? Does the color have a thematic significance? Does it have a descriptive or expressive function?

LIGHT: Has the artist considered the effect of light upon the work? Are the forms arranged so that a particular effect of light and shade will be attained? Do parts of the sculpture cast shadows? Are there sharp protrusions that catch the light? Deep pockets of shadow?

RELATION OF TECHNIQUE AND MATERIAL TO FORM: Are some of the forms inherent to the carving or modeling or assembling process? Has the surface been polished? Is there a pattern on the surface?

FURTHER ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS (i.e., historical analysis of subject matter): Is the subject treated in this same way in contemporaneous works? Has this been a constant tradition, or has the theme varied over the centuries? Is it a new subject altogether? Has a radically new interpretation been given to an old subject?

FUNCTION: Was the work intended for public or private viewing? Was its function primarily sepulchral; votive; commemorative; political; decorative, etc.? Was it made as a copy of an admired work?

CONTENT: How did the subject, theme, and form convey ideas, values, sentiments, beliefs, perceptions? What might the work of art say about the period and culture in which it was created?

PAINTING

This list of questions to ask when looking at paintings was adapted from, and augments, a guide written by J. S. Held, Professor Emeritus, Barnard College.

IDENTIFICATION: See under SCULPTURE

TECHNICAL DATA

1. Size of the work: in giving dimensions, list height first.
2. Medium: What materials are used for support--wood, canvas, cardboard, paper, etc.? More than one material? What kind of colors: oil, tempera, watercolor, pastel?
3. General condition: whole and undamaged? a fragment? surface abrasion? etc. (Usually, museums with large collections only exhibit paintings that are in reasonably good condition.)

SUBJECT MATTER: What is shown? Abstract, or representational (depicting recognizable people, places, things)? *Take inventory of what is represented, beginning with the major motifs.*

What type of subject is it: religious; historical; allegorical; genre--i.e., a scene with anonymous figures, usually in a situation from everyday life; still life; portrait; landscape; architectural view? If the painting seems to belong to more than one category, try to determine which is dominant.

To which culture and/or belief system did the subject belong (the cult or myths of a particular tribe, clan, or court; the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament; classical literature; the lives of the saints; Renaissance literature; history; everyday life, etc.)?

If the human figure is represented, to what category does the person(s) belong (deity; athlete; warrior; statesperson; private person; poet; philosopher; mythological figure, etc.)? There may, of course, be more than one figure and a mixture of categories.

Characterization: consider age; pose; movement; attire; body build; skin quality; facial expression; psychological focus; emphasis on anatomical or other parts; relationship of drapery or other clothing to body? If a group of figures, also consider: physical and psychological relationships among the figures; movement from figure to figure--rhythmic, patterned, disjointed, etc.

FUNCTION: Is the work an altarpiece; private devotional image; public mural; cabinet picture (made primarily for the delight of a private person, a connoisseur--someone very knowledgeable about art?); etc.?

STRUCTURE: BASIC CONSIDERATIONS:

1. **Frame:** the *boundaries* of the support upon which the image or design is painted [consider elsewhere the actual wooden or metal frame--a separate object--placed around the support]) and **pictorial area:** What is the proportion of height to width? How do the dominant shapes and motifs relate to the frame (which is usually a vertical or horizontal rectangle); are they "respected" by the frame or clearly cropped?

2. **Technique** (see "Medium," above). How is the paint applied: in strokes or layers? thickly or thinly? with a fine or a coarse brush, or by other means? Are the colors transparent or opaque?

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF SUBJECT MATTER

PORTRAIT. * Useful working definition of a **portrait:** A work of art whose primary purpose is to represent an actual historical person in such a way that the person portrayed can be recognized by the intended audience. Through pose, gestures, costume, setting, attributes, secondary figures and the abstract properties of style (color, space, light, paint handling, etc.) the portrait usually conveys widely-shared cultural ideals of identity, but sometimes private ones as well. Lifelikeness is often, but not always, a goal.

Technical points: Usually the figure in a portrait is referred to as "the sitter," even if the subject did not actually "sit" in person before the artist, or even if the subject was not alive at the time the portrait was painted (there are many posthumous portraits, for example).

Portraiture, cont'd

How much of the figure is shown? Portraits are classified as full-length, three-quarter length, half-length, and bust length.

How large is the figure within the frame (i.e., how much of the pictorial space does the figure occupy?) What kind of background or setting; pose, gestures; facial expression; action? Is the figure at an angle to the picture plane, turned in space, or frontal?

What attributes are included? Any indication of trade, profession, class, family relationship, etc.? Psychological relationship to the spectator; note the gaze; if it is directed toward the spectator, is it intimate, e.g., or aloof? What kind of clothing: rich or plain, tight or loose-fitting, "correct" or casual, etc.? Which aspects are stressed? Can you detect exaggeration or deviation from established norms?

Remember that what you see in a portrait is above all an *artistic construction and interpretation*, which stresses aspects important to the painter and audience. The *primary* object of your analysis, then, is not the historical person who is represented, but the personage that the artist has created. For an understanding of this personage a study of such elements as costume or background are probably much more revealing than "physiognomic guessing"--i.e., trying to read character through facial expression.

FIGURAL SCENES: What kind of subject does the story or incident represent (religious, mythological, historical, allegorical, everyday life, etc.)? Is the action quiet or full of physical movement? Many figures or few? Small or large in relation to the size of the picture? Full-length or cut by the frame? What kind of setting? Indoors or out? What role does the setting play? Main action stressed, or obscured?

Definition of history painting (from the Italian *istoria*, meaning story or narrative): figure painting that represents a story that is told in terms of figural poses, facial expressions, setting, attributes, and the abstract structure of the painting itself. Such stories are usually drawn from the bible, lives of the saints, classical history, and mythology. In Western art theory from the Renaissance to the later 19th century, history painting generally has been regarded as the most challenging and, by extension, the most important kind of painting.

LANDSCAPE. Subject matter: What kind of place is depicted: cultivated fields, woods, river bank, etc.? Can the season, weather, or time of day be determined? What kind of human activity, or signs of human activity, are shown? What kind of architectural elements appear and what is their thematic relationship to the site? (One can sometimes find a textual source or a literary category of landscape for even the most natural-looking views.). Does it represent a specific place--an identifiable town on the horizon, for example? If so, can you determine to what degree topographical accuracy has been sought?

Form: Consider the size of the area shown and the spectator's viewpoint. How do we visually "gain entry" into the picture, and how far can we see into the distance? What is the proportion of earth to sky, plain to elevation, water to land, open to closed areas? Are the motifs concentrated or diffuse? Is the picture painted in a summary style or is it full of objectively rendered detail?

What is the general character of the scene: attractive, forbidding, calm, turbulent, spectacular, intimate, etc.? What elements determine the effect? Consider all the motifs--as well as lighting, spatial construction, and color scheme, and their expressive qualities.

COMPOSITION

(arrangement of the parts that form the whole; pictorial structure)

Organization: Simple or complex? Geometrically ordered or free and seemingly accidental? Do some forms and motifs dominate over others? Is there symmetry or not? Crowdedness or spaciousness? Variety or repetition? Balance or lack of balance?

Lines: Contours of motifs as clear or obscured? Subservient or "assertive"? Angular or curved? If both, in what proportion and relationship? Is line--drawing--discernable at all?

Individual Units: Many or few? Large or small (both in relation to the outside world and to the picture area)? What range of sizes? Regular or irregular shapes? What kind of patterns do they form? What proportion of solid and "broken up" areas? Emphasis on center or marginal areas? Degree of ornateness? Are forms bulging or flat? If there are marginal areas, how are they treated?

Colors: Bright or subdued ("saturated" or "low key")? Are they "plain" or "rare"? Many colors or few ("limited" or "wide" palette)? Any one dominant? Warm (typically, reds, oranges, yellows) or cool (typically, blue, greys, greens)? Moderate or extreme contrasts? Large areas or small patches? Repetitious or echoing?

Light: Is there a consistent source? Inside or outside the picture or both? Strong or muted contrasts? Degree of clarity: how much shadow? What is the function of shadows: clarifying form or space, emphasizing certain parts of a picture at the expense of others, creating mood, etc.?

Space: Degree of flatness or depth? Open or screened off? Emphasis on solids or voids (i.e. intervals)? What kind of perspective (linear, aerial, etc.)? Is the main interest near or far or is "interest" evenly distributed? Is space suggested by planes in depth or recession, or by overlapping of forms? What is the degree and kind of spatial illusion?

GENERAL QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS: How consistent is the structure of the whole? What degree of variety or sameness? Does the work seem spontaneous or calculated? "Felicitous" or contrived? How meaningful are the various formal elements and their organization for the interpretation of the theme, for conveying mood, for creating sustained "visual interest"? Is the effect loud or intimate, monumental or trifling, solemn or lighthearted, ascetic or opulent? What are your criteria for judgments of this kind?

CONTENT (Historical knowledge is essential to answer these questions): What are the most likely ideas, values, sentiments, and perceptions with which the work was originally concerned? How might function have affected the form? How does the formal structure of the work of art act together with its subject and theme? Does the picture attempt to establish equivalences between pictorial form and other cultural norms? Does it try to undercut or subvert the mainstream ideology of a culture? Is it possible to make a reasoned statement about the artist's aims? Does the artist wish to elevate the spirit, instruct, moralize, entertain, satisfy his or her own need for expression, etc.? How might the original audience(s) have shaped the work? perceived the work? How might your own experiences, norms and ideological biases affect the ways in which you view the work?

GUIDE FOR ANALYZING ARCHITECTURE

IDENTIFICATION: Architect (if known); name of building; location; date (many buildings were constructed over an extended period of time. What parts were built at what dates? Did changes in style occur over time?).

PURPOSE: Temple, Christian church, tomb, house, palace, meeting hall, office building, etc.? Usually there are further distinctions — e.g., if it is a Catholic church, is it a cathedral, a pilgrimage church, a palace chapel, etc.? Was it built on an important site (e.g., St. Peter's in Rome is built over the purported grave of St. Peter, the first pope of the Western church)? What was the status of the people who originally used the building?

STRUCTURE: What forms help hold up the building? What materials were used, and were they easily available to the builders? How is the building lit? What is the size of the windows and doors? Are they elaborated through decoration? How are they spaced? Does the shape or height of the site affect the form of the building? Is the ceiling flat, or vaulted, or a dome? Is it made out of wood or stone? What sort of buttresses were used to help hold up the roof? Where are the supports placed?

Are there *columns* or *piers* in the building? Where? What type are they? Are they simple or ornate, massive or slender?

Is *sculpture* placed on the building? On which parts? Why at those particular places?

Exterior in relation to the interior: Are the various levels of the interior reflected on the outside? How? Which is more ornate, the outside or the inside? Is the front of the building flat and smooth or is it rusticated or full of protrusions? Did the architect deliberately contrast the outside and the inside? If so, why?

FUNCTION AND STRUCTURE: Did the building have to accommodate large numbers of people? Is the building meant to be commemorative, or is it a meeting place, or both? Are different parts of the building meant for different functions or different types of people? How are these areas arranged? Which area is the most important? How did the architect emphasize that this area is the most important?

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY IN RELATION TO ARCHITECTURAL FORMS: Are the architectural forms of this building similar to other buildings in the same area? Which elements reflect a local tradition? Are these forms a question of practicality (e.g., the shape of the roof may be a response to weather conditions in that area)? Or are these forms related to local customs (e.g., Byzantine churches always had balconies for the women)? Are architectural forms related to foreign models? Why would such models be chosen? Which elements are different?

Do the architectural forms imitate an earlier architectural vocabulary (e.g., Gothic Revival architecture, like St. Patrick's Cathedral in NYC)? Why are earlier models imitated?

What statements does the building make about human values, ideas, beliefs, sentiments?