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A Short Guide to Writ about Art

SEVENTH EDITION

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We cannot even become mid-twentieth century Americans contemplating American paintings whose meaning in part was in their apparently revolutionary departure from European work. (Even those of the original viewers who are still living now see the works somewhat differently from the way they saw them in the 1950s.)

Meaning, the argument goes, is indeterminate. Further, one can add that when a museum decontextualizes the work, or deprives it of its original context—for instance, by presenting on a white wall an African mask that once was worn by a dancer in an open place, or by presenting in a vitrine with pinpoint lighting a Japanese tea bowl that had once passed from hand to hand in a humble tea house—the museum thereby invites the perceivers to project their own conceptions onto the work. Or, it can be argued, the museum thereby makes invisible the social forces that created a culture.

An example: A well-intentioned liberal effort to present Chicano art in an art museum met with opposition from the radical left, which said that the proposed exhibition was an attempt to depoliticize the works and to appropriate them into bourgeois culture. In other words, it was argued that by framing (so to speak) the works in a museum rather than in their storefront context, the works were drained of their political significance and were turned into art—mere aesthetic objects in a museum. The frame (the context) is not neutral; it is not a meaningless container, but rather it becomes part of what it frames. (For further discussion of the museum as a frame, see page 75.)

This decontextualization or, to use a fairly new word, aestheticization has especially troubled some students of photography. Photographs that were intended to stir the viewer to social action, for instance photographs of the homeless, become something else when they are displayed in a museum. What do they become? They become objects presented for our aesthetic enjoyment, and our interest shifts from the ostensible subject to the skill of the photographer.

Much of what has been said about "white box" (or "white cube") museum displays, with their implication that museums are repositories of timeless values that transcend cultural boundaries, also can be said about the illustrations of art objects in books. Here works of art are presented (at least for the most part) in an aesthetic context, rather than in a social context of, say, economic and political forces. Indeed, we have already seen that some objects—Zuni war god figures—are sometimes taken out of their cultural context and then are presented (by a sort of benevolent colonialism, it is said) as possessing a new value: artistic merit. Some critics argue that to take a non-Western object out of its cultural context and to regard it as an independent work of art by discussing it in aesthetic terms is itself a Eurocentric (Western) colonial assault on the other culture, a denial of that culture's unique identity.

Conversely, it has been objected, when a book or a museum takes a single art object and surrounds it with abundant information about the cultural context, it demeans the object, reducing it to a mere cultural artifact—something lacking inherent value, something interesting only as part of a culture that is "the Other," remote and ultimately unknowable. Fifty years ago it was common for art historians to call attention to the aesthetic properties within a work, and for anthropologists to try to tell us "the meaning" of a work; today it is common for art historians to borrow ideas from a new breed of anthropologists, who tell us that we can never grasp the meaning of an object from another culture, and that we can understand only what it means in *our* culture. That is, we study it to learn what economic forces caused us to wrest the work from its place of origin, and what psychological forces cause us to display it on our walls. The battle between, on the one hand, providing a detailed context (and thus perhaps suggesting that the work is alien, "Other") and, on the other hand, decontextualizing (and thus slicing away meanin[illegible] possessed in its own culture, thereby implying it is part [illegible] of a universal culture) is still going on.*

Arguing an Interpretation (Supporting a Thesis)

Against the idea that works of art have no inherent core of meaning, and that what viewers see depends on their class or gender or whatever, one can argue that competent artists shape their work so that their intentions or meanings are evident to competent viewers (perhaps after some historical research). Most people who write about art make this assumption, and indeed such a position strikes most people as being supported by common sense.

It should be mentioned, too, that even the most vigorous advocates of the idea that meaning is indeterminate do not believe that all discussions of art are equally significant. Rather, they usually agree that a discussion is offered against a background of ideas—shared by writer and reader—as to what constitutes an effective argument, an effective presentation of a thesis. (As we saw on page 13, Kenneth Clark's thesis—or,

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*For online reviews of exhibitions, see *CAA.reviews <www.caareviews.org>*.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Support your thesis—your point—with evidence.

because his thesis is tentative, we can call it a hypothesis—is that Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Saskia* "may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters." Similarly, as we noted on page 16, Robert Herbert's thesis is that Millet's *The Gleaners* celebrates the heroic nature of the peasants.) When good writers offer a thesis, they do so in an essay that is

- **plausible** (reasonable because the thesis is supported with evidence)
- **coherent** (because it is clearly and reasonably organized)
- **rhetorically effective** (for instance, the language is appropriate to the reader; technical terms are defined if the imagined audience does not consist of specialists)

This means that the writer cannot merely set down random expressions of feeling or even of unsupported opinions. To the contrary, the writer assumes a reasonable but skeptical reader, and he or she therefore tries to persuade us by *arguing* a case—by pointing to evidence that causes us to say, in effect, "Yes, I see just what you mean, and what you say makes sense."

As readers, when do we say to ourselves, "Yes, this makes sense"? And what makes us believe that one interpretation is better than another? Probably the interpretations that make sense and that strike us as better than other interpretations are the ones that are more inclusive; they are more convincing because they account for more details of the work. The less sensible, less satisfactory, less persuasive interpretations of the supposed meaning(s) are less inclusive; they leave a reader pointing to some aspects of the work—to some parts of the whole—and saying, "Yes, but this explanation doesn't take account of . . ." or "This explanation is in part contradicted by. . . ."

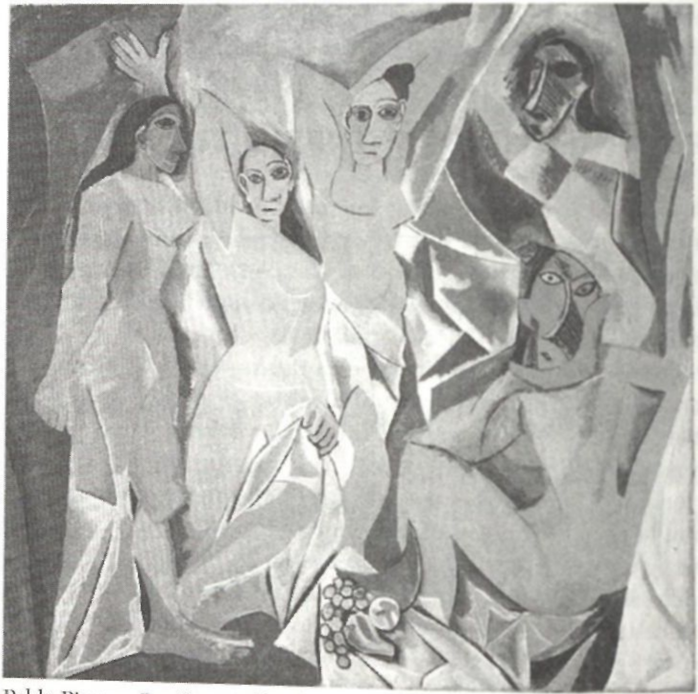
We'll return to the problem of interpreting meaning when we consider the distinction between subject matter and content in Chapter 2 (pages 42–43). For now, we should keep in mind two things. The first is E. H. Gombrich's comment that to a person who has been waiting for a bus, every distant object looks like a bus. The second is the implication within this comment: After the initial mistake, the person recognizes the object for what it really is.

EXPRESSING OPINIONS: THE WRITER'S "I"

The study of art is not a science, but neither is it the expression of random feelings loosely attached to works of art. You can—and must—come up with statements that seem true to the work itself, statements that almost seem self-evident (like Clark's words about Rembrandt) when the reader of the essay turns to look again at the object.

Of course works of art evoke emotions—not only nudes, but also, for example, the sprawled corpse of a rabbit in a still life by Chardin, or even the jagged edges or curved lines in a nonobjective painting. It is usually advisable, however, to reveal your feelings not by continually saying "I feel" and "this moves me," but by pointing to evidence, by calling attention to qualities in the object that shape your feelings. Thus, if you are writing about Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (see page 30), instead of saying, "My first feeling is one of violence and unrest," it is better to call attention (as John Golding does, in *Cubism*) to "the savagery of the two figures at the right-hand side of the painting, which is accentuated by the lack of expression in the faces of the other figures." Golding cites this evidence in order to support his assertion that "the first impression made by the *Demoiselles* . . . is one of violence and unrest." The point, then, is not to repress or to disguise one's personal response but to account for it and to suggest that it is not eccentric and private. Golding can safely assume that his response is tied to the object and that we share his initial response because he cites evidence that compels us to feel as he does—or at least evidence that explains why we feel this way. Here, as in most effective criticism, we get what has been called "persuasive description." It is persuasive largely because it points to evidence, but also because most of us have been taught—rightly or wrongly—to respect the authority of an apparently detached point of view.

Most instructors probably would rather be alerted to the evidence in the work of art than be informed about the writer's feelings, but to say that a writer should not keep repeating "I feel" is not to say that "I" cannot be used. Nothing is wrong with occasionally using "I," and noticeable avoidances of it—"it is seen that," "this writer," "the author," "we," and the like—suggest an offensive sham modesty. Further, in accordance



Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.* Paris (June-July 1907). Oil on canvas, 8′ × 7′8″ (243.9 × 233.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Photograph © 1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 1999 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society/ARS, New York.

with the current view that we *cannot* be objective, some writers think it is only fair to inform the reader of their biases, and of how they came to hold their present views. But does highly confessional writing work, or does it turn the reader off? Most of us who read about art want to learn about art, not about the writer's life, and we may even feel that abundant autobiographical passages are excrescences. Like someone else's pencilled notes in library books, abundant personal annotations are likely to strike a reader as arrogant and unintentionally trivial.

Finally, it must be admitted that the preceding paragraphs make it sound as if writing about art is a decorous business. In fact, it is often a loud, contentious business, filled with strong statements about the decline of culture, revolution, pornography (or a liberating sexuality), the destruction of the skyline, fraud, new ways of seeing. In 1846 Charles

Baudelaire called for a criticism that was "partial, passionate, and political," and much of what is written today fits this description. Examining the conflicting critical assumptions and methodologies will be part of your education, and if you find yourself puzzled you will also find yourself stimulated. An energetic conversation about art has [illegible] long time, and it is now your turn to say something.

What Writing about Art Is: A Very Short View

Most writing about art seeks to do one or both of two things:

- **to inform** ("This picture was painted in 1980"; "The anchor in the picture symbolizes hope"; "Conceptual Art favors intellectual over visual pleasure")
- **to persuade** ("This early picture is one of her best"; "Despite the widespread view that the anchor symbolizes hope, I will argue that here the anchor has no symbolic meaning"; "Most exhibitions of Conceptual Art are tedious because there is so little sensuality, so little visual pleasure")

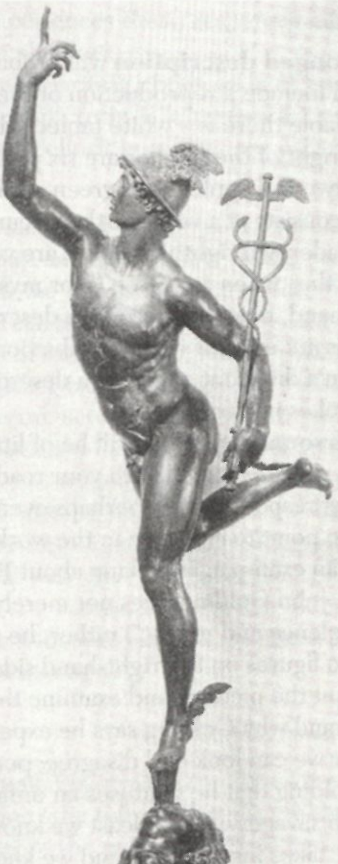
Recall Auden's comments on the function of criticism (page 11), where he said that a critic might "introduce" him to a work of which he had been unaware (here information would be dominant) or might "convince" him that he had undervalued a work (here persuasion would be dominant). Most writing, of course, seeks both to inform *and* to persuade—Kenneth Clark's paragraph (page 13) interpreting a painting by Rembrandt certainly tries to do both—though one purpose or the other usually dominates.

Whether you are chiefly concerned with informing or with persuading (and the two purposes are often indistinguishable, because writers usually want to persuade readers that the information is significant), you ought to be prompted by a strong interest in a work or a body of work. This interest usually is a highly favorable response to the material (essentially, "That's terrific"), but an unfavorable response ("Awful!") or a sense of bafflement ("Why would anyone care for that?") may also motivate writing. We can guess that Kenneth Clark, puzzled by the fact that "Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed," set his mind to work and came up with some tentative explanations. In any case, stimulated by a work, you put words onto paper, perhaps first by jotting down observations in no particular sequence. Later you will organize them for the benefit of an imagined reader, offering what the novelist D. H. Lawrence calls "a reasoned account of the feelings" produced by a work. Don't be embarrassed if a work produces strong feelings in you, pleasant (van Gogh wanted the picture of his bedroom to induce restful feelings in the viewer) or unpleasant (Damien Hirst says he wants his work to make viewers feel "uncomfortable").

The principle known as Occam's razor is sharp ("Entities ought not to be multiplied, except from necessity"); indeed we ought not to multiply entities needlessly, but here necessity compels us to go a bit beyond the categories of information and persuasion. Most academic writing about art, such as the material that you will read in courses in art history, is chiefly *analytic*, which is to say that it is concerned with the relationships (for instance of the parts to the whole within a work, or of historical causes and effects), and indeed your instructors probably will ask you to write papers that are largely analytic. The next chapter is devoted entirely to analysis, but writing about art includes a range of kinds of writing:

- **description,** such as might be given if one is reporting a stolen object ("Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* [page 33] is a bronze statue, 69 inches tall, of a male who is nude except for his hat; his hat and his heels are winged, and he holds a staff with wings at the top.")
- **interpretation** ("A youthful male figure with winged sandals and a winged hat can be identified as Mercury, a messenger of the gods.")
- **analysis** of the internal relationships—the structure—of the work ("The slender outstretched limbs suggest flight, but the sense of motion is countered by the strong vertical of the body and the left leg, which makes the figure seem stable.")
- **personal report,** or what might be called "confession," a report of one's immediate response and perhaps of later responses ("Unlike some sculpture which is interesting only when viewed from the front, *Mercury* is equally interesting when viewed from the sides and the rear.")
- **evaluation** ("The work is masterfully executed not only by the sculptor but also by the craftsmen who cast the image.")

To take a brief example: Ellen Johnson in a classic essay on Jackson Pollock (1912–56) in *Studio International* (June 1973), in speaking of *Blue Poles* calls attention to "the bam-bam-bam of the bright red, blue and yellow, flung and dripped along with the white, black and aluminum, to the powerful beat of the blue poles as they swing across the canvas." We get



Giovanni da Bologna, *Mercury*, 1580. Bronze, 69″ (Alinari; National Museum, Florence/Art Resource, NY)

description (the information about the colors of the painting), but surely we also get personal report—the writer's response—when Johnson speaks of the "bam-bam-bam" of the bright colors. The entire sentence implies a favorable evaluation.

Again, your instructors will probably ask you to write papers that are chiefly analytic, though some description, personal report, and evaluation almost surely will be implicit (if not explicit) in your analyses.

Caution:

- Bear in mind that **prolonged description** will probably become boring, especially if you include a reproduction of the work of art in your essay: "On the table there is a white tablecloth; at the left is a pitcher, and to the right of the pitcher are six pieces of fruit, including two lemons, two red apples, one green apple and one pear. The background consists of a wall, partly obscured by drapery." Why, your reader will rightly wonder, are you bothering to tell me all this, when I can see if for myself, at a glance? (On the other hand, readers welcome a description that calls attention to what is *not* evident in a reproduction, such as a view of a sculpture from a different angle, or a description of the texture of the brush strokes in a painting.)
- As for a **prolonged personal report,** it will be of little interest unless you can connect your responses with your reader's. An excellent way to connect responses, and perhaps even to create them in the reader, is to point to *evidence* in the work. We have already seen (page 29) an example: In talking about Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, John Golding does not merely say "My first feeling is one of violence and unrest"; rather, he points to "the savagery of the two figures on the right-hand side of the painting." We can look at the picture, and examine the evidence; if we agree, we understand why Golding says he experiences violence and unrest. Or we can look and disagree; perhaps we will want to reply to Golding that he confuses an unfamiliar form of sensuous beauty with savagery, but at least we know where Golding stands, why he takes his position, and we know why we are taking a different position.

Personal report often implies **evaluation** ("We are shocked, but we cannot look away," or, on the contrary, "There is simply nothing here that holds our interest"), and in Chapter 7 we will discuss some critical principles that underlie evaluation. Here it is enough to say that the two commonest sources for judging are (1) a spontaneous response ("This picture of a blind beggar is deeply disturbing"), and (2) principles alleged to be widely though not universally held ("A picture ought to be unified," "A building should not seek to disguise its purpose"). Although personal responses can hardly be argued about in rational terms, they can and must be set forth clearly and interestingly, so that the reader understands why the writer experiences these responses and why the writer evaluates the work as he or she does.

Again, most writing about art is of a mixed sort. Let's look at part of another paragraph from Ellen Johnson's essay on Jackson Pollock. (For a photograph of Pollock in action, see page 310.) Johnson says that in Pollock's work

> the material nature of the paint insistently demands our sensory response to its enormous variety. This is true even when the paint is thin and stains the canvas—becoming one with it—in this sense also the ground is eliminated and the homogeneity of the surface is further emphasized. In some pictures, Pollock enriched the already sensuous surface by adding bits of other matter; *Full Fathom Five* is especially rich in this regard. Several foreign objects are embedded in its oil and aluminum paint; but the thumb tacks, pennies, cigarettes, paint tube tops, matches, etc., are only discovered with very close scrutiny. Lost in the life of the painting, they "suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange." Pollock's grand scale paintings are curiously intimate and public in what they give—and what they ask of us. Being in their actual presence is somewhat like sitting in the front row at a symphony concert—one feels mixed up with the music, physically involved in the very process of making it.
>
> —"Jackson Pollock and Nature,"
> in *Studio International* 185:956 (June 1973), 260.

In talking about Pollock's work, Johnson gives us some relatively objective description (she tells us that thumb tacks, pennies, and other objects are embedded in the paint), and she gives us personal report (she tells us what "being in their actual presence is . . . like"). She also give us analysis (she tells us *how* Pollock gets his effects, for instance by enriching the surfaces), and she gives us evaluation (it is clear that Johnson admires the pictures). The metaphoric work *enriched*—used of a surface that has thumb tacks and pennies stuck to it!—strongly implies a favorable evaluation. By the way, Johnson's quotation ("suffer a sea-change"), comes from a song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the very song that provided Pollock with his title, *Full Fathom Five*. The quotation thus itself enriches Johnson's writing, lending it weight or authority.

You may want to reread Johnson's paragraph, and evaluate her ways of talking about Pollock. Do you image that, if you were standing in the presence of a work by Pollock, her paragraph would help you to understand and enjoy the work? If the paragraph shows ways of talking that you like, consider incorporating them into your own essay; and if it shows ways of talking that displease you, try to banish them from your own writing.

✔ Checklist of Basic Matters

- ✔ Does my paper have a thesis, a point?
- ✔ Do I support my argument with sufficient persuasive detail?
- ✔ Have I kept the needs of my audience in mind—for instance, have I defined unfamiliar terms?
- ✔ Is the paper organized, and is the organization clear to the reader?
- ✔ Have I set forth my views effectively and yet not talked too much about myself?

2

ANALYSIS

> To think is to disturb one's thoughts.
> —Jean Rostand

> All art is at once surface and symbol.
> —Oscar Wilde

ANALYTIC THINKING: SEEING AND SAYING

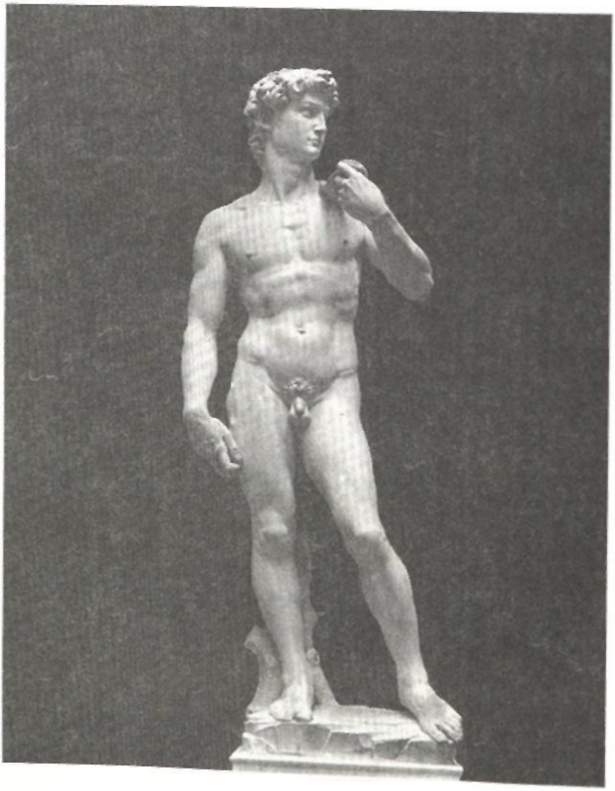
An **analysis** is, literally, a separating into parts in order to understand the whole. When you analyze, you are seeking to account for your experience of the work. (Analysis thus includes **synthesis,** the combination of the parts into the whole.) You might, for example, analyze Michelangelo's marble statue *David* (see page 38) by considering:

- Its sources (in the Bible, in Hellenistic sculpture, in Donatello's bronze *David*, and in the political and social ideas of the age—e.g., David as a civic hero, the enemy of tyranny, and David as the embodiment of Fortitude)
- Its material and the limitations of that material (marble lends itself to certain postures but not to others, and marble has an effect—in texture and color—that granite or bronze or wood does not have)
- Its pose (which gives it its outline, its masses, and its enclosed spaces or lack of them)
- Its facial expression
- Its nudity (a nude Adam is easily understandable, but why a nude David? Greek heroes and gods were nude, so Michelangelo dressed—so to speak—his David in heroic or even god-like nudity.)
- Its size (here, in this over-life-size figure, man as hero)
- Its context, especially its site in the sixteenth century (today it stands in the rotunda of the Academy of Fine Arts, but in 1504 it

  stood at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio—the town hall—where it embodied the principle of the citizen-warrior and signified the victory of republicanism over tyranny)

and anything else you think the sculpture consists of—or does not consist of, for Michelangelo, unlike his predecessor Donatello, does not include the head of the slain Goliath, and thus Michelangelo's image is not explicitly that of a conquering hero. Or you might confine your attention to any one of these elements.

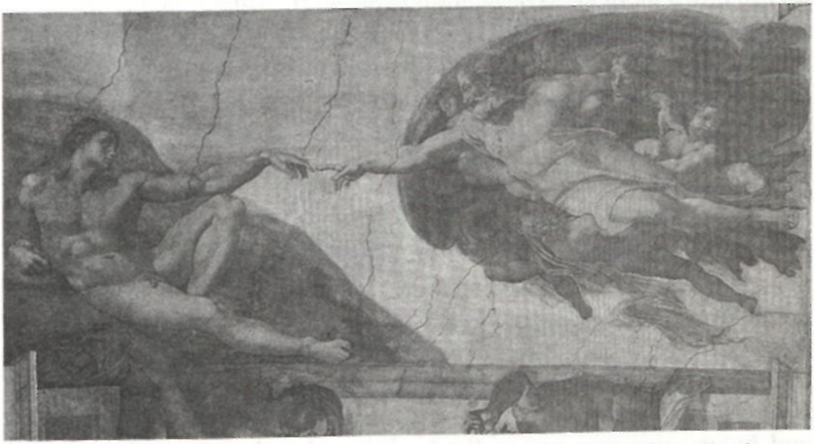
Analysis is not a process used only in talking about art. It is commonly applied in thinking about almost any complex matter. Martina Hingis plays a deadly game of tennis. What makes it so good? What does her backhand contribute? What does her serve do to her opponents? The relevance of such questions is clear. Similarly, it makes



Michelangelo, *David*, 1501–1504. Marble, 13′5″. Accademia, Florence. (Alinari/Art Resource, NY) sense, when you are writing about art, to try to see the components of the work.

Here is a very short analysis of one aspect of Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam* (1508–12) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (see below). The writer's *thesis,* or the point that underlies his analysis, is, first, that the lines of a pattern say something, communicate something to the viewer, and, second, that the viewer does not merely *see* the pattern but also experiences it, participates in it.

> The "story" of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam,* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, is understood by every reader of the book of Genesis. But even the story is modified in a way that makes it more comprehensible and impressive to the eye. The Creator, instead of breathing a living soul into the body of clay—a motif not easily translatable into an expressive pattern—reaches out toward the arm of Adam as though an animating spark, leaping from fingertip to fingertip, were transmitted from the maker to the creature. The bridge of the arm visually connects two separate worlds: the self-contained compactness of the mantle that encloses God and is given forward motion by the diagonal of his body; and the incomplete, flat slice of the earth, whose passivity is expressed in the backward slant of its contour. There is passivity also in the concave curve over which the body of Adam is molded. It is lying on the ground and enabled partly to rise by the attractive power of the approaching creator. The desire and potential capacity to get up



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam,* 1508–12. Fresco, 9′2″ × 18′8″. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. (Alinari; The Vatican Collection, Rome/Art Resource, NY)

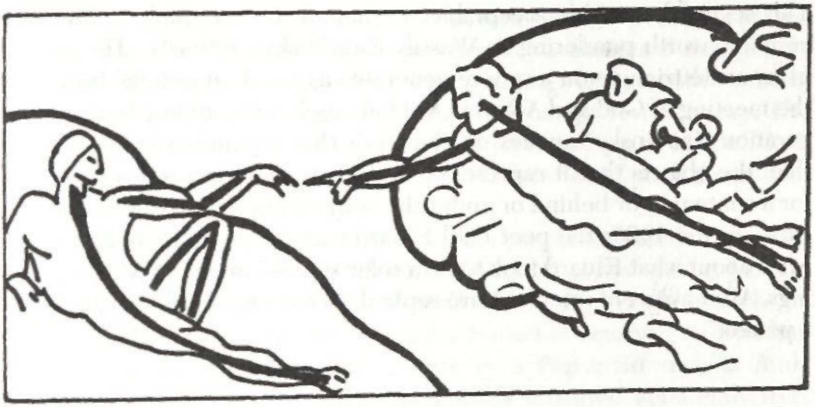
> and walk are indicated as a subordinate theme in the left leg, which also serves as a support of Adam's arm, unable to maintain itself freely like the energy-charged arm of God.
>
> Our analysis shows that the ultimate theme of the image, the idea of creation, is conveyed by what strikes the eye first and continues to organize the composition as we examine its details. The structural skeleton reveals the dynamic theme of the story. And since the pattern of transmitted, life-giving energy is not simply recorded by the sense of vision but presumably arouses in the mind a corresponding configuration of forces, the observer's reaction is more than a mere taking cognizance of an external object. The forces that characterize the meaning of the story come alive in the observer and produce the kind of stirring participation that distinguishes artistic experience from the detached acceptance of information.
>
> —Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1974), 458–60

Notice that Arnheim does not discuss color, or the Renaissance background, or the place of the work in its site or in Michelangelo's development, though any or all of these are fit topics also. He has chosen to analyze the effect of only one element, but his paragraphs *are* an analysis, an attempt to record perceptions and to reflect on them.

SUBJECT MATTER AND CONTENT

Before we go on to analyze some of the ways in which art communicates, we can take a moment to distinguish between the *subject matter* of a work and the *content* or *meaning*. (Later in this chapter, on pages 42–43, we will see that the content or meaning is expressed through the *style* or *form*.)

The study of artistic images and the cultural thoughts and attitudes that they reflect is called iconology (see pages 203–05). Two pictures of the same subject matter—for instance, the Crucifixion—can express different meanings: One picture can show Christ's painful death (head drooping to one side, eyes closed, brows and mouth contorted, arms pulled into a V by the weight of the body, body twisted into an S shape); the other can show Christ's conquest of death (eyes open, face composed, arms horizontal, body relatively straight and self-possessed). The subject matter in both is the same—the Crucifixion—but the meaning or content (painful death in one picture, the conquest of death in the other) is utterly different. (The image of Christ Triumphant—Christ as Ruler and Judge—was common in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; the Suffering Christ, emphasizing the mortal aspect of Jesus, was common in the later thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries.)



Rudolf Arnheim, diagram of Michelangelo's *Creation.* (Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye.* Copyright © 1954 The Regents of the University of California (University of California Press, 1974), pp. 458–460.)

To turn to another genre, if we look at some nineteenth-century landscapes we may see (aided by Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*) that the *subject matter* of skies streaked with red and yellow embodies a *content* that can be described, at least roughly, as the grandeur of God. Perhaps Paul Klee was trying to turn our attention from subject matter to content when he said, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible," or (in a somewhat freer translation), "Art does not reproduce what we see; rather, it makes us see."

The content, one might say, is the subject matter transformed or recreated or infused by intellect and feeling with meaning—in short, the content is a meaning made visible. This is what Henri Matisse was getting at when he said that drawing is "not an exercise of particular dexterity but above all a means of expressing intimate feelings and moods."

Even abstract and nonobjective works of art probably make visible the artist's inner experiences and thus have a subject matter that conveys a meaning. Consider Picasso's words:

> There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work.
>
> —*Picasso on Art,* ed. Dore Ashton (1972), 64

This seems thoroughly acceptable. Perhaps less acceptable at first, but certainly worth pondering, is Wassily Kandinsky's remark: "The impact of an acute triangle on a sphere generates as much emotional impact as the meeting of God and Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation.*" In this exaggeration Kandinsky touches on the truth that a painting conveys more than the objects that it represents. Still, lest we go too far in searching for a content in or behind or under the subject matter, we should recall a story. In the 1920s the poet Paul Eluard was eloquently talking to Joan Miró about what Eluard took to be a solar symbol in one of Miró's paintings. After a decent interval Miró replied, "That's not a solar symbol. It is a potato."

FORM AND CONTENT

The meaning or content of a work of art is not the opposite of form. To the contrary, the *form*—including such things as the size of the work, the kinds of brush strokes in a painting, and the surface texture of a sculpture—is part of the meaning. For example, a picture with short, choppy, angular lines will "say" something different from a picture with gentle curves, even though the subject matter (let's say a woman sitting at a table) is approximately the same. When Klee spoke of "going for a walk with a line," he had in mind a line's ability (so to speak) to move quickly or slowly, assertively or tentatively. Of course, many of the words we use in talking about lines—or shapes or colors—are metaphoric. If, for instance, we say that a line is "agitated" or "nervous" or "tentative" or "bold" we are not implying that the line is literally alive and endowed with feelings. We are really talking about the way in which we perceive the line, or, more precisely, we are setting forth our inference about what the artist intended or in fact produced, but such talk is entirely legitimate.

Are the lines of a drawing thick or thin, broken or unbroken? A soft pencil drawing on pale gray paper will say something different from a pen drawing made with a relatively stiff reed nib on bright white paper; at the very least, the medium and the subdued contrast of the one are quieter than those of the other. Similarly, a painting such as Jean-François Millet's *The Winnower* (1848), with a rough surface built up with vigorous or agitated brush strokes, will not say the same thing—and will not have the same meaning—as a painting with a smooth, polished surface that gives no evidence of the brush. If nothing else, the painting that gives evidence of brush strokes announces the presence of the painter, whereas the polished surface seems to eliminate the painter from the painting. In an age when most paintings had smooth surfaces, Jean François Millet's style as well as his content was revolutionary. The critic Théophile Gautier said that Millet "trowels on top of his dishcloth of a canvas, without oil or turpentine, vast masonries of paint so dry that no varnish could quench its thirst."

For obvious examples of artists who use contrasting media, compare a work by an Action painter of the 1940s and the 1950s such as Jackson Pollock (as you can see from the illustration on page 310, the marks on the canvas almost let us see the painter in the *act* of brushing or dribbling or spattering the pigment) with a work by a Pop artist such as Andy Warhol or Robert Indiana. Whereas Pollock executed apparently free, spontaneous, self-expressive, nonfigurative pictures, Pop artists tended to favor commonplace images (e.g., Warhol's Campbell's soup cans) and impersonal media such as the serigraph. Their works call to mind not the individual artist but anonymous commercial art and the machine, and these commercial, mechanical associations are part of the meaning of the works. Such works express what Warhol said in 1968: "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine."

In short, to get at the content or meanings of a work we have to interpret the subject matter, the material and the form (size, shape, texture, color, and the like), the sociohistoric content, and (if known) perhaps the artist's intentions. We also have to recognize that our own sociohistoric context—including our gender, economic background, political convictions, and so forth—will to some degree determine the meanings we see in a work. Nelson Goodman, you may recall from Chapter 1 (page 23), says that because the perceiver's eye "is regulated by need and prejudice" the eye "does not so much mirror as take and make." One also hears that all interpretations—all discussions of content—are misinterpretations, and that no standards (e.g., common sense, or the artist's intention) can guide us in evaluating different interpretations.

GETTING IDEAS: ASKING QUESTIONS TO GET ANSWERS

The painter Ad Reinhardt once said that "Looking is not as simple as it looks." Not until one has learned to look at art can one have useful ideas that one begins to set forth in writing. As Robert Frost said (with some overstatement), "All there is to writing is having ideas." What are some of [redacted] look for in trying to acquire an understanding of the lan- [redacted] is, in trying to understand what a work of art expresses?

Basic Questions

One can begin a discussion of the complex business of expression in the arts almost anywhere, but let's begin with some questions that can be asked of almost any work of art—whether a painting or a drawing or a sculpture or even a building. These are not naive questions, questions asked only by inexperienced viewers. They are questions that occupy the minds of professional art historians and critics. For instance, Evelyn Welch in her *Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500* (1997) says,

> Part I of this book asked questions about what an object was made from, how it was made, for whom, and by whom. It finished by asking how . . . posthumous fame was guaranteed for a number of Renaissance artists. Part II, which looks particularly at art in sacred settings, asks to what purpose this effort was directed.
>
> To attempt an answer, however partial, we need to know something about the original function and meaning of the works illustrated in this book. For example, where were they located? Who could have seen them and when? How were viewers supposed to behave in front of such objects and how did they actually behave? (133)

Here, then, are some basic questions:

What is my first response to the work? Amusement? Awe? Bafflement? Erotic interest? Annoyance? Shock? Boredom? Later you may modify or even reject this response, but begin by trying to study it. Jot down your responses—even your free associations. And *why* do you have this response? The act of jotting down a response, and of accounting for it analytically, may help you to deepen the response, or even to move beyond it to a different response.

When and where was the work made? By whom, and for whom? Does it reveal the qualities or values that your textbook attributes to the culture? (Don't assume that it does; works of art have a way of eluding easy generalizations.)

What did the work originally look like? Paper and silk darken, paintings crack, sculptures—even of marble or bronze—change color over the centuries, buildings decay and are renovated.

What does the *form* contribute? Take account of (a) *the material* (for instance, polished marble vs. unpainted wood, or transparent watercolor vs. opaque oil paint); (b) *the size* (a larger-than-life image will have an impact different from a miniature); (c) *the color* (realistic, or symbolic?); (d) *the composition* (balanced, or asymmetrical? highly patterned or not?).

Where would the work originally have been seen? Perhaps in a church or a palace, or a bourgeois house, or (if the work is an African mask) worn by a costumed dancer, but surely not in a textbook and not (unless it is a contemporary work) in a museum. For Picasso, "The picture-hook is the ruination of a painting. . . . As soon as [a painting] is bought and hung on a wall, it takes on quite a different significance, and the painting is done for." If the work is now part of an exhibition in a museum, how does the museum's presentation of the work affect your response?

What purpose did the work serve? To stimulate devotion? To impress the viewer with the owner's power? To enhance family pride? To teach? To delight? Does the work present a likeness, or express a feeling, or illustrate a mystery?

What is the *title*? Does it help to illuminate the work? The Vermeer painting on the cover of this book was customarily entitled *The Artist's Studio*, but a document written by a notary in 1676, only two months after Vermeer died, speaks of it as *The Art of Painting*, and it is now agreed that this was the original title. Does it make any difference? Yes. The seventeenth-century title guides us to see the picture not as one showing the painter's workplace but, rather, as one showing what painting *is*—the representation of significant human activities. (The model wears a laurel wreath, an emblem of Clio, Muse of History, and she holds a trumpet, an emblem of Fame; on the wall hangs a map of the Netherlands, suggesting that the painter draws upon the activities of the nation and brings glory to his nation; on the table is a mask, standing for the painter's job, which is to imitate life.)

Sometimes it is useful to ask yourself, "What would I call the work?" Picasso called one of his early self-portraits *Yo Picasso* (i.e., "I Picasso"), rather than, say, *Portrait of the Artist*, and indeed his title goes well with the depicted self-confidence. Charles Demuth called his picture of a grain elevator in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, *My Egypt*, a title that nicely evokes both the grandeur of the object (the silo shafts and their cap resemble an Egyptian temple) and a sense of irony (Demuth, longing to be in New York or Paris, was "in exile" in Lancaster).

Note, however, that many titles were not given to the work by the artist, and some titles are positively misleading. Rembrandt's *Night*

Watch was given that name at the end of the eighteenth century, when the painting had darkened; it is really a daytime scene. And we have already noticed, on pages 12–13, that one's response to a Rembrandt painting may differ, depending on whether it is titled *Self-Portrait with Saskia* or *The Prodigal Son.*

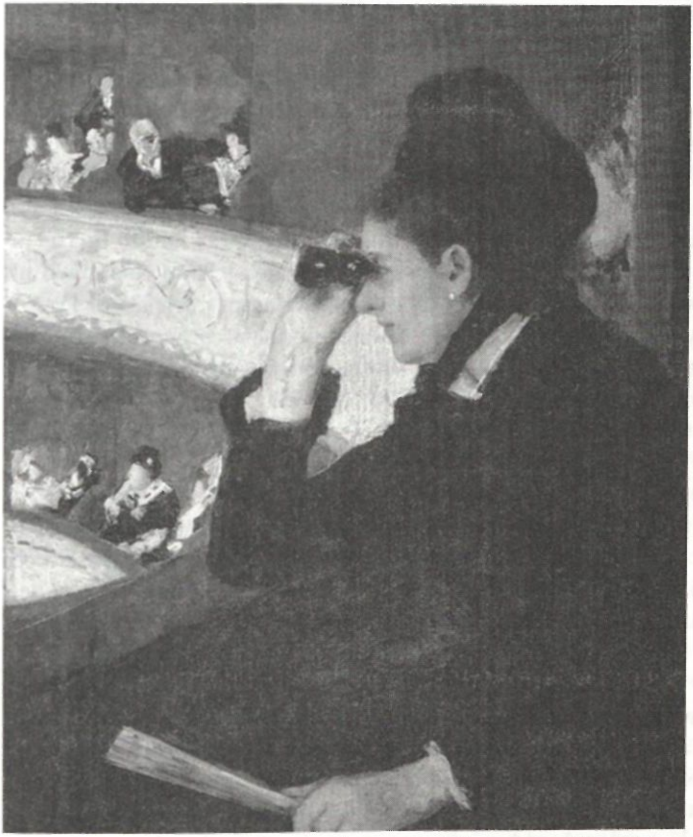
When you ask yourself such basic questions, answers (at least tentative answers) will come to mind. In the language of today's critical theory, by means of "directed looking" you will be able to "decode" (i.e., understand) "visual statements." In short, you will have some ideas, material that you will draw on and will shape when you are called on to write. Following are additional questions to ask, first on drawing and painting, then on sculpture, architecture, photography, and video art.

Drawing and Painting

What is the **subject matter?** *Who* or *what* can we identify in the picture? What (if anything) is happening?

If the picture is a **figure painting,** what is the relation of the viewer's (and the artist's) **gaze** to the gaze of the figure(s)? After all, the viewer—the bearer of the gaze—is looking at an "Other." Does this Other return the viewer's gaze, thereby asserting his or her identity and power, or does the subject look elsewhere, unaware of the voyeur viewer-painter? It has been argued, for instance, that in his pictures of his family and friends, Degas gives his subjects a level stare, effectively placing them on the same social level as the viewer; in his pictures of working women (laundresses, dancers), he adopts a high viewpoint, literally looking down on his unaware subjects; in his pictures of prostitutes, he looks either from below or from above, gazing as a spy or voyeur might do, with unsuspecting and therefore vulnerable victims.

Concern with the "gaze," and the idea that (in art) males look actively whereas women are to-be-looked-at, was perhaps first set forth in English by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in the journal *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6–18, reprinted in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989). Today much art criticism concerns gazing, and the implication is that the person who gazes is in fact a voyeur, who derives both pleasure and power from the act of looking. In Mary Cassatt's *Woman in Black at the Opera* (c. 1878; also called *In the Loge* and *At the Français, a Sketch*), however, there is not so simple a dichotomy as male-looker and female-looked-at.



Mary Stevenson Cassatt, *Woman in Black*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 32 × 26 in. (81.3 × 66 cm.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Hayden Collection. 10.35.

True, the woman in the foreground is being looked at by the man in the upper left, but the woman herself is very actively looking, and she is a far more dominating figure (severe profile, dark garments, large size, angular forms) than the small and somewhat comically sprawling man who is looking at her (and in effect at us). These two figures are looking; does the person who is looking at the picture—yet another, the viewer—see power as located in the woman rather than in the man—or does the man's voyeuristic activity undermine the woman's apparent power?

If more than one figure is shown, what is the relation of the figures to each other?

If there is only one figure, is it related to the viewer, perhaps by the gaze or by a gesture? If the figure seems posed, do you agree with those theoreticians who say that posing is a subordination of the self to the gaze of another, and the offering of the self (perhaps provocatively or shamefully) to the viewer?

Baudelaire said that a **portrait** is "a model complicated by an artist." The old idea was that a good portrait not only describes the face but also characterizes the personality of the sitter. The face was said to be the index of the personality; thus, an accurate portrait of King X showed his cruelty (it was written all over his face), and accurate portraits of Pope Y and of Lady Z showed, respectively, the pope's piety (or worldliness) and the lady's tenderness (or arrogance). It usually turned out, however, that the art historians who saw such traits in particular portraits already knew what traits to expect. When the portrait was of an unidentified sitter, the commentaries varied greatly.

It is now widely held that a portrait is not simply a representation of a face that reveals the inner character; a portrait is also a presentation or a construction created by the artist *and* the sitter. Sitters and artists both (so to speak) offer interpretations.

How are their interpretations conveyed? Consider such matters as these:

- How much of the figure does the artist show, and how much of the available space does the artist cause the figure to occupy? What effects are thus gained?
- What do the clothing, furnishings, accessories (swords, dogs, clocks, and so forth), background, angle of the head or posture of the head and body, direction of the gaze, and facial expression contribute to our sense of the figure's personality (intense, cool, inviting)? Is the sitter portrayed in a studio setting or in his or her own surroundings?
- Does the picture advertise the sitter's *political* importance, or does it advertise the sitter's *personal* superiority? A related way of thinking is this: What sort of identity is presented, social or psychological? That is, does the image present a strong sense of social class, for instance, soldier or merchant or (as in many Renaissance portraits) beautiful-wife-of-a-wealthy man, or on the other hand does it present a strong sense of psychology—a sense of an independent inner life (as is usual in portraits by Rembrandt)?

- If frontal, does the figure seem to face us in a godlike way, as if observing everything before it? If three-quarter, does it suggest motion, a figure engaged in the social world? If profile, is the emphasis decorative or psychological? (Generally speaking, a frontal or, especially, a three-quarter view lends itself to the rendering of a dynamic personality, perhaps even interacting in an imagined social context, whereas a profile does not—or if a profile does reveal a personality it is that of an aloof, almost unnaturally self-possessed sitter.)
- If the picture is a double portrait, does the artist reveal what it is that ties the two figures together? Do the figures look at each other? If not, what is implied by the lack of eye contact?
- Is the figure (or are the figures) allegorical (turned into representations of, say, liberty or beauty or peace or war)? Given the fact that female sitters are more often allegorized than males, do you take a given allegorical representation of a female to be an act of appropriation—a male forcing a woman into the role of "Other"?
- If the picture is a self-portrait, what image does the artist project? Van Gogh's self-portraits in which he wears a felt hat and a jacket show him as the bourgeois gentleman, whereas those in which he wears a straw hat and a peasant's blouse or smock show him as the country artist.
- It is sometimes said that every portrait is a self-portrait. (In Leonardo's formula, "the painter always paints himself." In the words of Dora Maar, Picasso's mistress in the 1930s and 1940s, "All his portraits of me are lies. They're all Picassos. Not one is Dora Maar.") Does this portrait seem to reveal the artist in some way?
- Some extreme close-up views of faces, such as those of the contemporary photo-realist painter Chuck Close, give the viewer such an abundance of detail—hairs, pores, cracks in lips—that they might be called landscapes of faces. Do they also convey a revelation of character or of any sort of social relationship, or does this overload of detail prevent the viewer from forming an interpretation?
- Does the portrait, in fact, reveal anything at all? Looking at John Singer Sargent's portrait entitled *General Sir Ian Hamilton*, the critic Roger Fry said, "I cannot see the man for the likeness." Sargent said that he saw an animal in every sitter.

A good deal of **recent portraiture**—say from the 1980s onward—probably in response to a heightened awareness of gender-identity, AIDS, multicultural identity, and televised images of human suffering—emphasizes the subject's vulnerability or instability. It may, for example, show a face ravaged by disease, thus calling into question the values set forth by much traditional portraiture (female beauty, male power); in fact, it calls into question the old idea of the possibility of a unified, stable subject. Example: Tom Knechtel's self-portrait entitled *A Middle-Aged Scheherazde* (1997) not only shows the bearded male artist in a female role but also shows him with two faces, one smiling, one brooding. For a discussion of this image and others, see Michael Duncan in *Art in America*, October 1999: 124–31.

For a student's discussion of two portraits by John Singleton Copley, see page 122. For a professional art historian's discussion of Anthony Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I, see page 172. For a brief, useful survey of the topic, see Joanna Woodall's introduction to a collection of essays, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, edited by Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997).

Let's now consider a **still life** (plural: *still lifes*, not *still lives*)—a depiction of inanimate objects in a restricted setting, such as a tabletop.

- What is the chief interest? Is it largely in the skill with which the painter captures the transparency of glass, the reflection of light on silver, the textures of ham and cheese? Or is the interest chiefly in the relationships between the shapes? Or is it in the symbolic suggestions of opulence (a Dutch seventeenth-century painting, showing a rich tablecloth on which are luxurious eating utensils and expensive foods) or, on the other hand, is the interest in humble domesticity and the benefits of moderation (a seventeenth-century Spanish painting, showing a simple wooden table on which are earthenware vessels)?
- Does it imply transience, perhaps by a burnt-out candle, or even merely by the perishable nature of the objects (food, flowers) displayed? Other common symbols of *vanitas* (Latin for "emptiness," particularly the emptiness of earthly possessions and accomplishments) are a mouse nibbling at food, an overturned cup or bowl, and a skull.
- If the picture shows a piece of bread and a glass of wine flanking a vase of flowers, can the bread and wine perhaps be eucharistic

symbols, the picture as a whole representing life everlasting achieved through grace?
- Is there a contrast (and a consequent evocation of *pathos*) between the inertness and sprawl of a dead animal and its vibrant color or texture? Does the work perhaps even suggest, as some of Chardin's pictures of dead rabbits do, something close to a reminder of the crucifixion?
- Is all of this allegorizing irrelevant?

Consult Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (1997) and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (1999).

When the picture is a **landscape,** you may want to begin by asking the following questions:

- What is the relation between human beings and nature? Are the figures at ease in nature (e.g., aristocrats lounging complacently beneath the mighty oaks that symbolize their ancient power and grandeur) or are they dwarfed by it? Are they earthbound, beneath the horizon, or (because the viewpoint is low) do they stand out against the horizon and perhaps seem in touch with the heavens, or at least with open air?
- Do the natural objects in the landscape (e.g., billowy clouds or dark clouds, gnarled trees or airy trees) somehow reflect the emotions of the figures?
- What does the landscape say about the society for which it was created? Even if the landscape seems realistic, it may also express political or spiritual forces. Does it, for instance, reveal an aristocrat's view of industrious, well-clad peasants toiling happily in a benevolently ordered society? Does it—literally—put the rural poor in the shade, letting the wealthy people get the light? (This view is set forth in John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840*, 1980.)

In short, a landscape painting is not just an objective presentation of earth, rocks, greenery, water, and sky. The artist presents what is now called a social construction of nature—for instance, nature as a place made hospitable by the wisdom of the landowners, or nature as an endangered part of our heritage, or nature as a world that we have lost, or nature as a place where the weary soul can find rest and nourishment.

(For an analysis employing recent critical approaches, see Mark Roskill, *The Language of Landscape*, 1996. For a readable discussion of how art turns or constructs land into landscape, see Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 1999. Andrews's book includes an especially valuable "Bibliographic Essay.")

We have been talking about particular subjects—figure painting, still life, landscape—but other questions concern all kinds of painting and drawing. Are the **contour lines** (outlines of shapes) strong and hard, isolating each figure or object? Or are they irregular, indistinct, fusing the subjects with the surrounding space? Do the lines seem (e.g., in an Asian ink painting) calligraphic—that is, of varied thicknesses that suggest liveliness or vitality—or are the lines uniform and suggestive of painstaking care?

What does the **medium** (the substance on which the artist acted) contribute? For a drawing made with a wet medium (e.g., ink applied with a pen, or washes applied with a brush), what does the degree of absorbency of the paper contribute? Are the lines of uniform width, or do they sometimes swell and sometimes diminish, either abruptly or gradually? (Quills and steel pens are more flexible than reed pens.) For a drawing made with a dry medium (e.g., silverpoint, charcoal, chalk, or pencil), what does the smoothness or roughness of the paper contribute? (When crayon is rubbed over textured paper, bits of paper show through, suffusing the dark with light, giving vibrancy.) In any case, a drawing executed with a dry medium, such as graphite, will differ from a drawing executed with a wet medium, where the motion of the instrument must be interrupted in order to replenish the ink or paint.*

If the work is a painting, is it in **tempera** (pigment dissolved in egg, the chief medium of European painting into the late fifteenth century), which usually has a somewhat flat, dry appearance? Because the brush strokes do not fuse, tempera tends to produce forms with sharp edges—or, we might say, because it emphasizes contours it tends to produce colored drawings. Or is the painting done with **oil paint,** which (because the brush strokes fuse) is better suited than tempera to give an effect of muted light and blurred edges? Thin layers of translucent colored oil

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*For a well-illustrated, readable introduction to the physical properties of drawings, see Susan Lambert, *Reading Drawings* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). For a more detailed but somewhat drier account, see James Watrous, *The Craft of Old-Master Drawings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957).

glazes can be applied so that light passing through these layers reflects from the opaque ground colors, producing a soft, radiant effect; or oil paint can be put on heavily (*impasto*), giving a rich, juicy appearance. Impasto can be applied so thickly that it stands out from the surface and catches the light. Oil paint, which lends itself to uneven, gestural, bravura handling, is thus sometimes considered more painterly than tempera, or, to reverse the matter, tempera is sometimes considered to lend itself to a more linear treatment.

Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ink painting, too, illustrates the contribution of the media. A painting on silk is usually very different from a painting on paper. Because raw silk absorbs ink and pigments, thereby diluting the strength of the line and the color, silk is usually sized (covered with a glaze or filler) to make it less absorbent, indeed, slick. If the brush moves rapidly on the sized surface, it may leave a broken line, so painters working on silk usually proceed slowly, meticulously creating the image. Painters who want spontaneous, dynamic, or blurred brushwork usually paint not on silk but on paper.

Caution: Reproductions in books usually fail to convey the texture of brush strokes. For additional cautions about books, slides, and the World Wide Web, see page 62.

Is the **color** imitative of appearances, or symbolically expressive, or both? An example of symbolic color is the uniform gold background of some medieval painting, which is meant to represent heaven and to convey the beauty and unity of God. (Why is the flesh of the Buddha gold? Why did Picasso use white, grays, and blacks for *Guernica*, when in fact the Spanish fascists bombarded the Basque town on a sunny day?) How are the colors related—for example, by bold contrasts or by gradual transitions?

The material value of a pigment—that is to say, its cost—may itself be expressive. For instance, Velázquez's lavish use of expensive ultramarine blue in his *Coronation of the Virgin* in itself signifies the importance of the subject. Ultramarine—"beyond the sea"—made of imported ground lapis lazuli, was more expensive than gold; its costliness is one reason why, like gold, it was used for some holy figures in medieval religious paintings, whereas common earth pigments were used for nondivine figures.

Vincent van Gogh, speaking of his own work, said he sought "to express the feelings of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mixture and their oppositions, the mysterious vibrations of tones in each other's proximity . . . to express the thought behind a brow by the radiance of a bright tone against a dark ground." As this quotation may indicate, comments on the expressive value of color often seem highly subjective and perhaps unconvincing. One scholar, commenting on the yellowish green liquid in a bulbous bottle at the right of Manet's *Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, suggests that the color of the drink—probably absinthe—is oppressive. A later scholar points out that the distinctive shape of the bottle indicates that the drink is crème de menthe, not absinthe, and therefore he finds the color not at all disturbing.*

Caution: It is often said that *warm colors* (red, yellow, orange) come forward and produce a sense of excitement, whereas *cool colors* (blue, green) recede and have a calming effect, but experiments have proved inconclusive; the response to color—despite clichés about seeing red or feeling blue—is highly personal, highly cultural, highly varied. Still, a few things can be said, or at least a few terms can be defined. *Hue* gives the color its name—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. *Value* (also called *lightness* or *darkness, brightness*) refers to relative lightness or darkness of a hue. When white is added, the value becomes "higher"; when black is added, the value becomes "lower." The highest value is white; the lowest is black. Light gray has a higher value than dark gray. *Saturation* (also called *hue intensity*) is the strength or brightness of a hue—one red is redder than another; one yellow is paler than another. A vivid hue is of high saturation; a pale hue is of low saturation. But note that much in a color's appearance depends on context. Juxtaposed against green, red will appear redder than if juxtaposed against orange. A gray patch surrounded by white seems darker than the same shade of gray surrounded by black.

When we are armed with these terms, we can say, for example, that in his South Seas paintings Paul Gauguin used *complementary colors* (orange and blue, yellow and violet, red and green, i.e., hues that when mixed absorb almost all white light, producing a blackish hue) at their highest values, but it is harder to say what this adds up to. (Gauguin himself said that his use of complementary colors was "analogous to Oriental chants sung in a shrill voice," but one may question whether the analogy is helpful.)

For several reasons our nerve may fail when we try to talk about the effect of color. For example:

- Light and moisture cause some pigments to change over the years, and the varnish customarily applied to Old Master

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*See a four-volume series (three volumes published as of 2002) called *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics* (1994–), various editors. For a more philosophic analysis, see John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (1999).

paintings inevitably yellows with age, altering the appearance of the original.

- The colors of a medieval altarpiece illuminated by flickering candlelight or by light entering from the yellowish translucent (not transparent) glass or colored glass of a church cannot have been perceived as the colors that we perceive in a museum, and, similarly, a painting by van Gogh done in bright daylight cannot have looked to van Gogh as it looks to us on a museum wall.

The moral? Be cautious in talking about the effect of color. Keep in mind the remark of the contemporary painter Frank Stella: "Structural analysis is a matter of describing the way the picture is organized. Color analysis would seem to be saying what you think the color does. And it seems to me that you are more likely to get an area of common agreement in the former."

What is the effect of **light** in the picture? Does it produce sharp contrasts, brightly illuminating some parts and throwing others into darkness, or does it, by means of gentle gradations, unify most or all of the parts? Does the light seem theatrical or natural, disturbing or comforting? Is light used to create symbolic highlight? (In Rembrandt's *Adoration of the Shepherds* [1646] the careful viewer sees that the light does *not* come from the lanterns held by the shepherds but miraculously comes from the manger.)

Do the objects or figures share the **space** evenly, or does one overpower another, taking most of the space or the light? What is the focus of the composition? The **composition** or **design**—the ordering of the parts into a whole by line, color, and shape—is sometimes grasped at an initial glance and at other times only after close study. For instance, is the composition:

- symmetrically balanced (and perhaps therefore monumental, or quiet, or rigid and oppressive)?
- diagonally recessive and perhaps therefore, as in Munch's *The Scream* (next page),* dramatic or even melodramatic?

Are figures harmoniously related, perhaps by a similar stance or shared action, in which case they can be said to balance or echo each other, or are they opposed, perhaps by diagonals thrusting at each other? Speaking generally—very generally—**diagonals** may suggest motion or animation or instability, except when they form a triangle resting on its base, which

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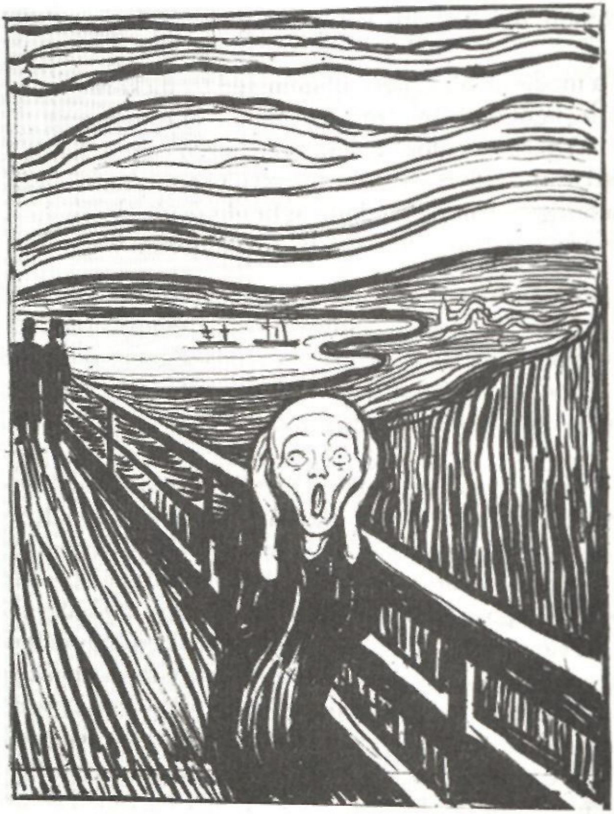
*For a further comment on *The Scream*, see page 171.



Edvard Munch, *The Scream.* 1896. Lithograph, printed in black, composition: 13¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 10″. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Matthew T. Mellon Fund. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

is a highly stable form. **Horizontal lines** suggest tranquility or stability—think of plains, or of reclining figures. **Vertical lines**—tree trunks thrusting straight up, or people standing, or upright lances as in Velázquez's *Surrender of Breda*—may suggest a more vigorous stability. **Circular lines** are often associated with motion and sometimes—perhaps especially by men—with the female body and with fertility. It is even likely that Picasso's *Still-Life on a Pedestal Table,* with its rounded forms, is, as he is reported to have called it, a "clandestine" portrait of one of his mistresses. These simple formulas, however, must be applied cautiously, for they are not always appropriate. Probably it is fair to say, nevertheless, that when a *context* is established—for instance, by means of the title of a picture—these lines may be perceived to bear these suggestions if the suggestions are appropriate.

Caution: The sequence of eye movements with which we look at a picture has little to do with the compositional pattern. That is, the eye does not move in a circle when it perceives a circular pattern. The mind, not the eye, makes the relationships. It is therefore inadvisable to say things like "The eye follows the arrow and arrives finally at the target."

Does the picture convey **depth,** that is, **recession in space?** If so, how? If not, why not? (Sometimes space is flattened—e.g., to convey a sense of otherworldliness or eternity.) Among the chief ways of indicating depth are the following:

- *Overlapping* (the nearer object overlaps the farther object)
- *Foreshortening* (as in the recruiting poster *I Want You,* where Uncle Sam's index finger, pointing at the viewer, is represented chiefly by its tip, and, indeed, the forearm is represented chiefly by a cuff and an elbow)
- *Contour hatching* (lines or brush strokes that follow the shape of the object depicted, as though a net were placed tightly over the object)
- *Shading* or *modeling* (representation of shadows on the body)
- Representation of *cast shadows*
- *Relative position from the ground line* (objects higher in the picture are conceived of as further away than those lower)
- *Perspective* (parallel lines seem to converge in the distance, and a distant object will appear smaller than a near object of the same size.* Some cultures, however, use a principle of *hierarchic scale.* In such a system a king, for instance, is depicted as bigger than a slave not because he is nearer but because he is more important; similarly, the Virgin in a nativity scene may be larger than the shepherds even though she is behind them. For an example of hierarchic scale, see the sculpture by Olwe of Ise, on page 205, where the senior queen is the largest figure, the king the second largest, and the two attendants, at the king's feet, are the smallest because they are the least important.)

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*In the Renaissance, perspective was used chiefly to create a coherent space and to locate objects within that space, but later artists have sometimes made perspective expressive. Giorgio de Chirico, for example, often gives a distorted perspective that unnerves the viewer. Or consider van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles.* Although van Gogh said that the picture conveyed "rest," viewers find the swift recession disturbing. Indeed, the perspective in this picture is impossible: If one continues the diagonal of the right-hand wall by extending the dark line at the base, one sees that the bed's rear right foot would be jammed into the wall.

- *Aerial or atmospheric perspective* (remote objects may seem—depending on the atmospheric conditions—slightly more bluish than similar near objects, and they may appear less intense in color and less sharply defined than nearer objects. In Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, for instance, the edges of the distant mountains are blurred. *Caution:* Aerial perspective does *not* have anything to do with a bird's-eye view.)

Does the picture present a series of planes, each parallel to the picture surface (foreground, middle ground, background), or does it, through some of the means just enumerated, present an uninterrupted extension of one plane into depth?

What is the effect of the **shape** and **size** of the work? Because, for example, most still lifes use a horizontal format, perhaps thereby suggesting restfulness, a vertical still life may seem relatively towering and monumental. Note too that a larger-than-life portrait—Chuck Close's portraits are eight or nine feet high—will produce an effect different from one eight or nine inches high. If you are working from a reproduction be sure, therefore, to ascertain the size of the original.

What is the **scale,** that is, the relative size? A face that fills a canvas will produce a different effect from a face of the same size that is drawn on a much larger canvas; probably the former will seem more expansive or more energetic, even more aggressive.

A Note on Nonobjective Painting. We have already noticed (page 42) Wassily Kandinsky's comment that "The impact of an acute triangle on a sphere generates as much emotional impact as the meeting of God and Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation.*" Kandinsky (1866–1944), particularly in his paintings and writings of 1910–14, has at least as good a title as anyone else to being called the founder of twentieth-century **nonobjective art.** Nonobjective art, unlike figurative art, depends entirely on the emotional significance of color, form, texture, size, and spatial relationships, rather than on representational forms.

The term *nonobjective art* includes **abstract expressionism**—a term especially associated with the work of New York painters in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Jackson Pollock (1912–56) and Mark Rothko (1903–70), who, deeply influenced by Kandinsky, sought to allow the unconscious to express itself. Nonobjective art is considered synonymous with **pure abstract art,** but it is *not* synonymous with "abstract art," since in most of what is generally called abstract art, forms are recognizable though simplified.

In several rather mystical writings, but especially in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), Kandinsky advanced theories that exerted a great influence on American art after World War II. For Kandinsky, colors were something to be felt and heard. When he set out to paint, he wrote, he "let himself go. . . . Not worrying about houses or trees, I spread strips and dots of paint on the canvas with my palette knife and let them sing out as loudly as I could."

Nonobjective painting is by no means all of a piece; it includes, to consider only a few examples, not only the lyrical, highly fluid forms of Kandinsky and of Jackson Pollock but also the pronounced vertical and horizontal compositions of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and the bold, rough slashes of black on white of Franz Kline (1910–62), although Kline's titles sometimes invite the viewer to see the slashes as representations of the elevated railway of Kline's earlier years in New York City. Nonobjective painting is not so much a style as a philosophy of art: In their works, and in their writings and their comments, many nonobjective painters emphasized the importance of the unconscious and of chance. Their aim in general was to convey feelings with little or no representation of external forms; the work on the canvas conveyed not images of things visible in the world, but intuitions of spiritual realities. Notice that this is *not* to say that the paintings are "pure form" or that subject matter is unimportant in nonobjective art. To the contrary, the artists often insisted that their works were concerned with what really was real—the essence behind appearances—and that their works were not merely pretty decorations. Two Abstract Expressionists, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb (1903–74), emphasized this point in a letter published in the *New York Times* in 1943:

> There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.
>
> —Quoted in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980,*
> ed. Ellen H. Johnson (1982), 14

Similarly, Jackson Pollock, speaking in 1950 of his abstract works created in part by spattering paint and by dribbling paint from the can, insisted that the paintings were not mere displays of a novel technique and were not mere designs:

> It doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.
>
> —Quoted in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980,*
> ed. Ellen H. Johnson (1982), 10

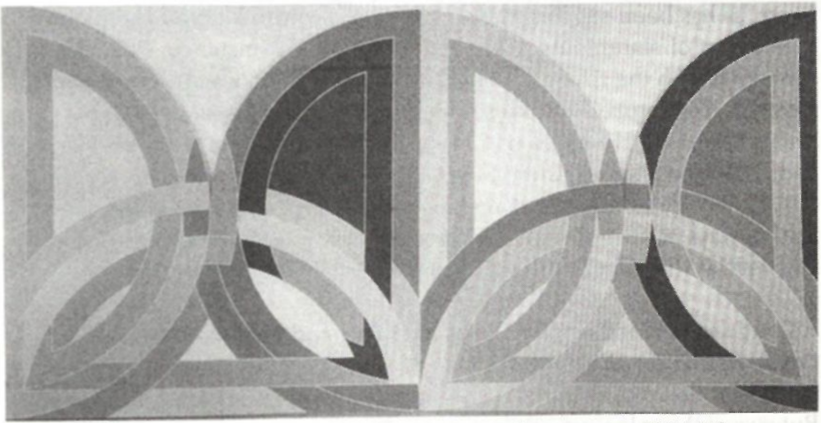
For a photograph of Pollock working with his "poured" or "drip" technique, where the lines on the canvas refer not to objects but only to the gestures that made the lines, see page 310.

The **titles** of nonobjective pictures occasionally suggest a profound content (e.g., Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret*, Rothko's *Vessels of Magic*), occasionally a more ordinary one (Pollock's *Blue Poles*), and occasionally something in between (Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*), but one can judge a picture by its title only about as well as one can judge a book by its cover (i.e., sometimes well, sometimes not at all).

In writing about the work of nonobjective painters, you may get some help from their writings, though of course you may come to feel in some cases that the paintings do not do what the painters say they want the pictures to do. Good sources for statements by artists are *Theories of Modern Art* (1984), ed. Herschel B. Chipp; *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980* (1982), ed. Ellen H. Johnson; *Art in Theory: 1900–1990* (1992), ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood; and *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (1996), ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. (In reading the comments of artists, however, it is often useful to recall Claes Oldenburg's remark that anyone who listens to an artist talk should have his eyes examined.)

Finally, here is a comment about a severely geometric nonobjective picture by Frank Stella (b. 1936) (see page 61). The picture, one of Stella's Protractor series, is 10 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Robert Rosenblum writes:

> Confronted with a characteristic example, *Tahkt-i-Sulayman I*, the eye and the mind are at first simply dumbfounded by the sheer multiplicity of springing rhythms, fluorescent Day-Glo colors, and endlessly shifting planes—all the more so, because the basic components (circles and semicircles; flat bands of unmodulated color) and the basic design (here a clear bilateral symmetry) are so lucid. But again, as always in Stella's work, the seeming economy of vocabulary is countered by the elusive complexities of the result. At first glance, the overriding pattern is of such insistent symmetrical clarity that we feel we can seize predictable principles of organization and bring to rest this visual frenzy. But Stella permits no such static resolution, for the overall symmetries of the design are contradicted by both the interlace patterns and the colors, which constantly assert their independence from any simple-minded scheme. In a surprising way, this tangle of gyrating energies, released and recaptured, provides a 1960s ruler-and-compass equivalent of the finest Pollocks, even in terms of its engulfing scale (here 20 feet wide), which imposes itself in an almost physical way upon the spectator's



Frank Stella, *Tahkt-i-Sulayman I,* 1967. Fluorescent acrylic on canvas, 10′ × 20′. (Collection, Mr. Robert Rowan; © 1992 Frank Stella/ARS, New York)

> world. In this case, the springing vaults of the arcs, some reaching as high as 4 feet above one's head, turn the painting into something that verges on the architectural, a work that might rest on the floor and be subject to natural physical laws of load and support. Seen on this immense scale, the thrusts and counterthrusts, the taut and perfect spanning of great spaces, the razor-sharp interlocking of points of stress all contrive to plunge the observer into a dizzying tour-de-force of aesthetic engineering.
>
> —*Frank Stella* (1971), 48–49

What brief advice can be given about responding to nonobjective painting? Perhaps only this (and here is something of a repetition of what has already been said about representational drawings and paintings): As you look at the work, begin with your responses to the following:

- The dynamic interplay of colors, shapes, lines, textures (of pigments and of the ground on which the pigments are applied)
- The size of the work (often large)
- The shape of the work (most are rectangular or square, but especially in the 1960s many are triangular, circular, chevron-shaped, diamond-shaped, and so on, with the result that, because they depart from the traditional shape of paintings, they seem almost to be objects—two-dimensional sculptures rather than paintings)
- The title

Later, as has been suggested, you may want to think about the picture in the context of statements made by the artist—for instance, Pollock's "My concern is with the rhythms of nature, the way the ocean moves. I work inside out, like nature." Useful sources include the four collections of comments edited by Herschel B. Chipp, Ellen H. Johnson, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, and Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, mentioned on page 60.

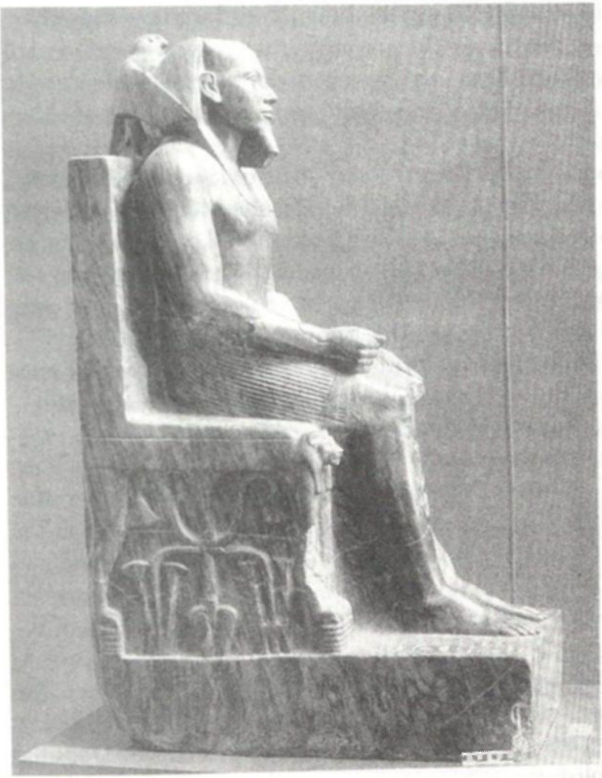
Finally, remember that making a comparison is one of the most effective ways of seeing things. How does this work differ from that work, and what is the effect of the difference?

A Cautionary Word about Slides and Reproductions in Books and on the World Wide Web. The colors of slides, reproductions in books, and images on the World Wide Web range from pretty accurate to very poor. But even if the color is good, such reproductions give little if any sense of the texture and scale of the original painting. In short, although reproductions can be helpful, they give only a remote idea of the original, losing, for instance, the texture of the paper of a drawing or the three-dimensionality and juiciness of thickly applied oil pigment. Thus, a van Gogh still life of sunflowers seems, in a photograph, to have a flat yellow background but looking at the original one sees that the small, regular brushstrokes give the background a rich texture, almost that of a finely woven basket. If possible, therefore, write only about works that you have actually seen—works that you have actually experienced by standing in their presence. If this is not possible, ask your instructor to recommend the books or websites with the best reproductions of the works that you are writing about.

Sculpture

For what **purpose** was this object made? To edify the faithful? To commemorate heroism? What is expressed through the representation? What, for instance, does the highly ordered, symmetrical form of *King Chefren* (also called Khafre; Egyptian, third millennium BC; see page 63) suggest about the man? What is the relationship of naturalism to idealism or abstraction? (On realism and idealism, see pages 107–14.) If the sculpture represents a deity, what ideas of divinity are expressed? If it represents a human being as a deity (e.g., Alexander the Great as Herakles, or King Chefren as the son of an Egyptian deity), how are the two qualities portrayed?

If the work is a **portrait,** some of the questions suggested earlier for painted portraits (pages 48–49) may be relevant. Consider especially whether the work presents a strong sense of an individual or, on the other



Egyptian, *King Chefren*, ca. 2500 BC. Diorite, 5′6″. (Courtesy Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Munich/Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

hand, of a type. Paradoxically, a work may do both: Roman portraits from the first to the middle of the third century are (for the most part) highly realistic images of the faces of older men, the conservative nobility who had spent a lifetime in public office. Their grim, wrinkled faces are highly individualized, and yet these signs of age and care indicate a rather uniform type, supposedly devoted and realistic public servants who scorn the godlike posturing and feigned spontaneity of such flashy young politicians as Caesar and Pompey. That is, although the model might not in fact have been wrinkled, it apparently was a convention for a portrait bust to show signs of wear and tear, such as wrinkles, thereby indicating that the subject was a hardworking, mature leader. In other societies such signs of mortality may be removed from leaders. For instance, African portrait sculpture of leaders tends to present idealized images. Thus, in Ife bronzes from the twelfth century, rulers show a commanding stance and a fullness of body, whereas captives (shown in order to say something not about themselves but about their conqueror) may be represented with bulging eyes, wrinkled flesh, and bones evident beneath the skin. In keeping with the tradition of idealizing, commemorative images of elders usually show them in the prime of life.

What does the **pose** imply? Effort? Rest? Arrested motion? Authority? In the Lincoln Memorial, Lincoln sits; in the Jefferson Memorial, Jefferson stands, one foot slightly advanced. Lincoln's pose as well as his face suggest weariness, while Jefferson's pose as well as his faintly smiling face suggest confidence and action. How relevant to a given sculpture is Rodin's comment that "The body always expresses the spirit for which it is the shell"?

Are certain bodily features or forms distorted? If so, why? (In most African equestrian sculpture, the rider—usually a chief or an ancestor—dwarfs the horse, in order to indicate the rider's high status.)

To what extent is the **drapery** independent of the body? Does it express or diminish the **volumes** (enclosed spaces, e.g., breasts, knees) that it covers? Does it draw attention to specific points of focus, such as the head or hands? Does it indicate bodily motion or does it provide an independent harmony? What does it contribute to whatever the work expresses? If the piece is a wall or niche sculpture, does the pattern of the drapery help to integrate the work into the façade of the architecture?

If the sculpture is a bust, what sort of **truncation** (termination of the image) has the sculptor used? Does a straight horizontal line run below the shoulders, or does the bare or draped chest end in a curve? Does the sitter's garment establish the termination? Or is the termination deliberately irregular, perhaps emphasizing the bust as a work of art rather than as a realistic reproduction of the subject?

What do the **medium** and the **techniques** by which the piece was shaped contribute?* Clay is different from stone or wood, and stone or wood can be rough or they can be polished. Would the statue of Chefren (see page 63) have the same effect if it were in clay instead of in highly polished diorite? Because diorite is hard, it requires a great deal of work to carve it; thus, a statue of diorite expressed wealth and enduring power. Can one imagine Daniel Chester French's marble statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln Memorial, done in stainless steel? What are the associations

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*Media and techniques are lucidly discussed by Nicholas Penny in *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Also of use is a brief treatment, Jane Basset and Peggy Fogelman, *Looking at European Sculpture: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 1997).

of the material? For instance, early in this century welded iron suggested heavy-duty industry, in contrast with bronze and marble, which suggested nobility, the classical world, and great wealth. In the late twentieth century, many sculptors used fragile nontraditional material—in a moment we will discuss such a work by Eva Hesse that uses bed sheets and cord—partly to mock the idea that art is precious and enduring. Perhaps the extreme example is Dieter Roth's sculpture made of dirt and rabbit feces, at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum.

Even more important, what is the effect of the **tactile qualities;** for example, polished wood versus terra cotta? Notice that the tactile qualities result not only from the medium but also from the **facture;** that is, the process of working on the medium with certain tools. An archaic Greek *kouros* ("youth") may have a soft, warm look not only because of the porous marble but because of traces left, even after the surface was smoothed with abrasives, of the sculptor's bronze punches and (probably) chisels.

Consider especially the distinction between **carving,** which is subtractive, and **modeling,** which is additive; that is, the difference between cutting away, to release the figure from the stone, wood, or ivory, and, on the other hand, building up or modeling, to create the figure out of a pliable material such as lumps of clay, wax, or plaster.* Rodin's *Walking Man* (see page 176), built up by modeling clay and then cast in bronze, recalls in every square inch of the light-catching surface a sense of the energy that is expressed by the figure. Can one imagine Michelangelo's *David* (see page 33), carved in marble, with a similar surface? Even assuming that a chisel could imitate the effects of modeling, would the surface thus produced catch the light as Rodin's does? And would such a surface suit the pose and the facial expression of *David?*

Compare *King Chefren* with Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* (see page 33). *King Chefren* was carved; the sculptor, so to speak, cut away from the block everything that did not look like Chefren. *Mercury* was modeled—built up—in clay or wax, and then cast in bronze. The massiveness or stability of *King Chefren* partakes of the solidity of stone, whereas the elegant motion of *Mercury* suggests the pliability of clay, wax, and bronze.

What kinds of **volumes** are we looking at? Geometric (e.g., cubical, spherical) or irregular? Is the **silhouette** (outline) open or closed? In

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*"Modeling" is also used to refer to the treatment of volumes in a sculpture. Deep modeling, characterized by conspicuous projections and recesses, for instance in drapery, creates strong contrasts in highlights and shadows. On the other hand, shallow modeling creates a relatively unified surface.

Michelangelo's *David,* David's right side is said to be closed because his arm is extended downward and inward; his left side is said to be open because the upper arm moves outward and the lower arm is elevated toward the shoulder. Still, although the form of *David* is relatively closed, the open spaces—especially the space between the legs—emphasize the potential expansion or motion of the figure. The unpierced, thoroughly closed form of *King Chefren,* in contrast to the open form of *Mercury,* implies stability and permanence.

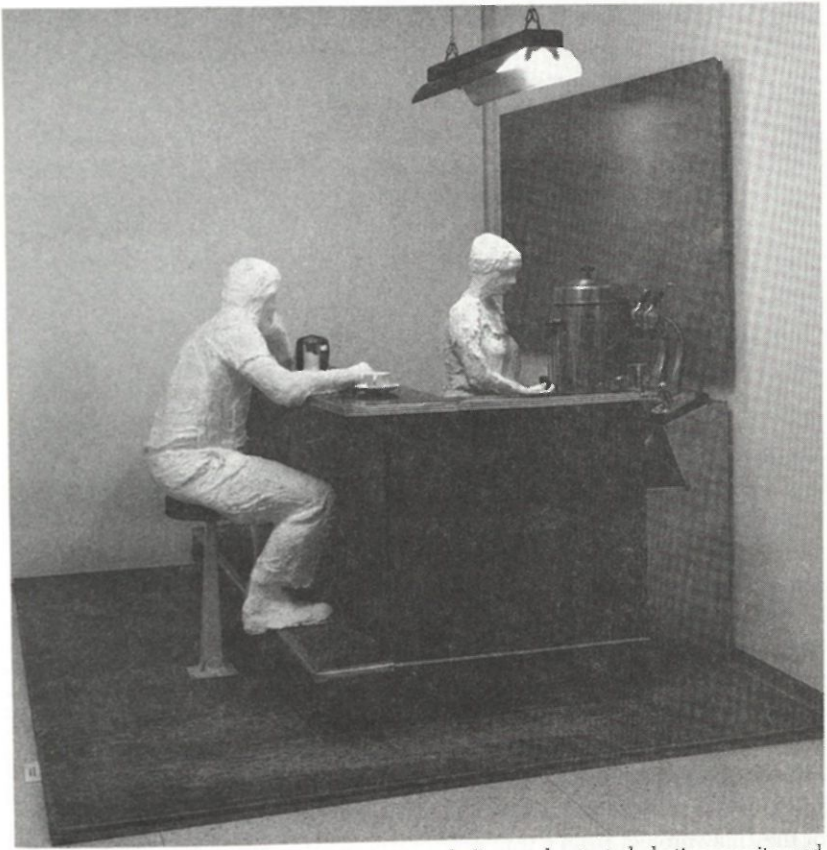
What is the effect of **color,** either of the material or of gilding or paint? Is color used for realism or for symbolism? Why, for example, in the tomb of Urban VIII, did Gian Lorenzo Bernini use bronze for the sarcophagus (coffin), the pope, and Death, but white marble for the figures of Charity and Justice? The whiteness of classical stone sculpture is usually regarded as suggesting idealized form (though in fact the Greeks tinted the stone and painted in the eyes), but what is the effect on the emotional resonance of the whiteness of George Segal's plaster casts (see page 67) of ordinary figures in ordinary situations, in this instance of a man sitting on a real stool and a woman standing beneath a real fluorescent light and behind a real counter, set off by a deep-red panel at the back wall? Blankness? Melancholy?

What is the **scale** (size in relation to something else, usually to the subject in real life, or to the viewer)? Obviously the impact of a larger-than-life image differs from the impact of a miniature.

What was the original **location** or **site** or physical context (e.g., a pediment, a niche, a public square)?

Is the **base** a part of the sculpture (e.g., rocks, or a tree trunk that helps to support the figure), and, if so, is it expressive as well as functional? George Grey Barnard's *Lincoln—the Man,* a bronze figure in a park in Cincinnati, stands not on the tall classical pedestal commonly used for public monuments but on a low boulder—a real one, not a bronze copy—emphasizing Lincoln's accessibility, his down-to-earthness. Almost at the other extreme, the flying *Mercury* (see page 33) stands tiptoe on a gust of wind, and at the very extreme, Marino Marini's *Juggler* is suspended above the base, emphasizing the subject's airy skill.

Notice, too, that some sculpture does not have a base. George Segal's *The Diner* is an example of what has come to be called "environmental sculpture," an image or images placed within a specific location. Talking about his own work, Segal said: "What was considered revolu-



George Segal, *The Diner,* 1964–66. Plaster, wood, chrome, laminated plastic masonite, and fluorescent lamp 93¾″ × 144¼ × 96″. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, 1966. © George Segal/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

tionary about it was taking sculpture off the old plywood box and making it the center of a specifically constructed installation."

Where is the best place (or where are the best places) to stand in order to experience the work? Do you think that the sculpture is intended to be seen from multiple views, all of which are equally interesting and important? Or is the work strongly oriented toward a single viewpoint, as is the case with a sculpture set within a deep niche? If so, are frontality, rigidity, and stasis important parts of the meaning? Or does the image seem to burst forward from the niche?* Keep in mind, too, the effect of the location of the work; a free-standing sculpture placed in the middle of a room may seem more active than a sculpture placed against a wall.

How close do you want to get? Why?

A Note on Nonobjective Sculpture. Until the twentieth century, sculpture used traditional materials—chiefly stone, wood, and clay—and was representational, imitating human beings or animals by means of masses of material. Sometimes the masses were created by cutting away (as in stone and wooden sculpture), sometimes they were created by adding on (as in clay sculpture, which then might serve as a model for a work cast in bronze), but in both cases the end result was a representation.

Twentieth-century sculpture, however, is of a different sort. For one thing, it is often made out of industrial products—Plexiglas, celluloid, cardboard, brushed aluminum, galvanized steel, wire, and so forth—rather than made out of traditional materials, notably wood, stone, clay, and bronze. Second, instead of representing human beings or animals or perhaps ideals such as peace or war or death (ideals that in the past were often represented allegorically through images of figures), much twentieth-century sculpture is concerned with creating spaces. Instead of cutting away (carving) or building up (modeling) material to create representational masses, the sculptors join material (**assemblage**) to explore spaces or movement in space. Unlike traditional sculpture, which is usually mounted on a pedestal, announcing that it is a work of art, something to be contemplated as a thing apart from us, the more recent works we are now talking about may rest directly on the floor or ground, as part of the environment in which we move, or they may project from a wall or be suspended by a wire.

In a moment we will look at a work using nontraditional materials, but first let's consider a bit further this matter of nonrepresentational sculpture. Think of a traditional war memorial—for instance, a statue of a local general in a park, or the Iwo Jima Monument representing marines raising an American flag—and then compare such a work with Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial,* dedicated in 1982 (see page 69). Lin's pair of 200-foot granite walls join to make a wide V, embracing a gently sloping plot of ground. On the walls, which rise from ground level to a

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*Many older works of sculpture were placed relatively high, for example in temples and cathedrals. Sometimes the sculptors took account of this placement, elongating the torsos and enlarging the heads so that the figures look "natural" when seen from below. If such a sculpture is placed at eye-level, it may seem ineptly carved.

Another Look at the Questions

As the preceding discussion of various kinds of art has shown, there are many ways of helping yourself to see. In short, you can stimulate responses (and understanding) by asking yourself two basic questions:

- *What is this doing?* Why is this figure here and not there? Why is the work in bronze rather than in marble? Or put it this way: What is the artist up to?
- *Why do I have this response?* Why do I find this landscape oppressive but that landscape inviting, this child sentimental but that child fascinating? That is, how did the artist manipulate the materials in order to produce the strong feelings that I experience?

The first of these questions (*What is this doing?*) requires you to identify yourself with the artist, wondering, perhaps, why the artist chose one medium over another, whether pen is better than pencil for this drawing, or watercolor better than oil paint for this painting.

Sometimes artists tell us what they are up to. Van Gogh, for example, in a letter (11 August 1888) to his brother, helps us to understand why he put a blue background behind the portrait of a blond artist: "Behind the head instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by the simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky." But, of course, you cannot assume that the artist's stated intention has been fulfilled in the work itself.

The second question (*Why do I have this response?*) requires you to trust your feelings. If you are amused or repelled or unnerved or soothed, assume that your response is appropriate and follow it up—but not so rigidly that you exclude the possibility of other, even contradictory feelings. (The important complement to "Trust your feelings" is "Trust the work of art." The study of art ought to enlarge feelings, not merely confirm them.)

Almost any art history book that you come across will attempt to answer questions posed by the author. For example, in the introduction to *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1991), Elizabeth Johns writes:

> Two simple questions underscore my diagnosis: "Just whose 'everyday life' is depicted?" and "What is the relationship of the actors in this 'everyday life' to the viewers?"

The book contains her answers.

Indeed, as we saw when we quoted Evelyn Welch on page 49, art historians typically ask the questions "What?" "Why?" and "Who?"—and offer answers.

FORMAL ANALYSIS

What Formal Analysis Is

It should be understood that the word *formal* in **formal analysis** is not used as the opposite of *informal,* as in a formal dinner or a formal dance. Rather, a formal analysis—the result of *looking* closely—is an analysis of the form the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning. Rudolf Arnheim's assertion that the curves in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* convey "transmitted, life-giving energy" is a brief example. (See page 40.) Similarly, one might say that a pyramid resting on its base conveys stability, whereas an inverted pyramid—one resting on a point—conveys instability or precariousness. Even if we grant that these forms may not universally carry these meanings, we can perhaps agree that at least in our culture they do. That is, members of a given *interpretive community* perceive certain forms or lines or colors or whatever in a certain way.

Formal analysis assumes a work of art is (1) a constructed object (2) with a stable meaning (3) that can be ascertained by studying the relationships between the elements of the work. If the elements "cohere," the work is "meaningful." That is, the work of art is an independent object which possesses certain properties, and if we think straight we can examine these properties and can say what the work represents and what it means. The work speaks directly to us, and we understand its language—we respond appropriately to its characteristics (shape, color, texture, and so on), at least if we share the artist's culture. Thus, a picture (or any other kind of artwork) is like a chair; a chair *can* be stood on or burned for firewood or used as a weapon, but it was created with a specific purpose that was evident and remains evident to all competent viewers—in this case people who are familiar with chairs. Further, it can be evaluated with reference to its purpose—we can say, for instance, that it is a poor chair because it is uncomfortable and fragile. (In a few moments we will consider opposing views.)

Formal Analysis Versus Description

Is the term *formal analysis* merely a pretentious substitute for *description?* Not quite. A **description** is an impersonal inventory, dealing with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see: "A woman in a white dress sits at a table, reading a letter. Behind her . . . ." It can also comment on the execution of the work ("thick strokes of paint," "a highly polished surface"), but it does not offer inferences, and it does not evaluate. A highly detailed description that seeks to bring the image before the reader's eyes—a kind of writing fairly common in the days before illustrations of artworks were readily available in books—is sometimes called an *ekphrasis* or *ecphrasis*, from the Greek word for "description" (*ek* = out, *phrazein* = tell, declare). Such a description may be set forth in terms that also seek to convey the writer's emotional response to the work. That is, the description praises the work by seeking to give the reader a sense of being in its presence, especially by commenting on the presumed emotions expressed by the depicted figures. Here is an example: "We recoil with the terrified infant, who averts his eyes from the soldier whose heart is as hard as his burnished armor."

Writing of this sort is no longer common; a description today is more likely to tell us, for instance, that the head of a certain portrait sculpture "faces front; the upper part of the nose and the rim of the right earlobe are missing. . . . The closely cropped beard and mustache are indicated by short random strokes of the chisel," and so forth. These statements, from an entry in the catalog of an exhibition, are all true and they can be useful, but they scarcely reveal the thought, the reflectiveness, that we associate with analysis. When the entry in the catalog goes on, however, to say that "the surfaces below the eyes and cheeks are sensitively modeled to suggest the soft, fleshly forms of age," we begin to feel that now indeed we are reading not merely a description but an analysis, because here the writer is arguing a thesis.

Similarly, although the statement that "the surface is in excellent condition" is purely descriptive (despite the apparent value judgment in "excellent"), the statement that the "dominating block form" of the portrait contributes to "the impression of frozen tension" can reasonably be called analytic. One reason we can characterize this statement as analytic (rather than descriptive) is that it offers an argument, in this instance an argument concerned with cause and effect: The dominating block form produces an effect—*causes* us to perceive a condition of frozen tension.

Much of any formal analysis will inevitably consist of description ("The pupils of the eyes are turned upward"), and accurate descriptive writing itself requires careful observation of the object and careful use of words. But an essay is a formal analysis rather than a description only if it connects effects with causes, thereby showing *how* the described object works. For example, "The pupils of the eyes are turned upward" is a description, but the following revision is an analytic statement: "The pupils of the eyes are turned upward, suggesting a heaven-fixed gaze, or, more bluntly, suggesting that the figure is divinely inspired."

Another way of putting it is to say that analysis tries to answer the somewhat odd-sounding question, "*How* does the work mean?" Thus, the following paragraph, because it is concerned with *how* form makes meaning, is chiefly analytic rather than descriptive. The author has made the point that a Protestant church emphasizes neither the altar nor the pulpit; "as befits the universal priesthood of all believers," he says, a Protestant church is essentially an auditorium. He then goes on to analyze the ways in which a Gothic cathedral says or means something very different:

> The focus of the space on the interior of a Gothic cathedral is . . . compulsive and unrelievedly concentrated. It falls, and falls exclusively, upon the sacrifice that is re-enacted by the mediating act of priest before the altar-table. So therefore, by design, the first light that strikes the eye, as one enters the cathedral, is the jeweled glow of the lancets in the apse, before which the altar-table stands. The pulsating rhythm of the arches in the nave arcade moves toward it; the string-course moldings converge in perspective recession upon it. Above, the groins of the apse radiate from it; the ribshafts which receive them and descend to the floor below return the eye inevitably to it. It is the single part of a Gothic space in which definiteness is certified. In any other place, for any part which the eye may reach, there is always an indefinite beyond, which remains to be explored. Here there is none. The altar-table is the common center in which all movement comes voluntarily to rest.
>
> —John F. A. Taylor, *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts*
> (New York: Dover, 1964), 115–17

In this passage the writer is telling us, analytically, *how* the cathedral means.

Opposition to Formal Analysis

Formal analysis, we have seen, assumes that artists shape their materials so that a work of art embodies a particular meaning and evokes a pleasurable response in the spectator. The viewer today does not try to see the historical object with "period" eyes but, rather, sees it with an aesthetic attitude. The purpose of formal analysis is to show *how* intended meanings are communicated in an aesthetic object.

Since about 1970, however, these assumptions have been strongly called into question. There has been a marked shift of interest from the work as a thing whose meaning is contained within itself—a decontextualized object—to a thing whose meaning partly, largely, or even entirely consists of its context, its relation to things outside of itself (for instance, the institutions or individuals for whom the work was produced), especially its relationship to the person who perceives it.

Further, there has been a shift from viewing an artwork as a thing of value in itself—or as an object that provides pleasure and that conveys some sort of profound and perhaps universal meaning—to viewing the artwork as an object that reveals the power structure of a society. The work is brought down to earth, so to speak, and is said thereby to be "demystified." Thus the student does not look for a presumed unified whole. On the contrary, the student "deconstructs" the work by looking for "fissures" and "slippages" that give away—reveal, unmask—the underlying political and social realities that the artist sought to cover up with sensuous appeal.

A discussion of an early nineteenth-century idyllic landscape painting, for instance, today might call attention not to the elegant brushwork and the color harmonies (which earlier might have been regarded as sources of aesthetic pleasure), or even to the neat hedges and meandering streams (meant to evoke pleasing sensations), but to such social or psychological matters as the painter's unwillingness to depict the hardships of rural life and the cruel economic realities of land ownership in an age when poor families could be driven from their homes at the whim of a rich landowner. Such a discussion might even argue that the picture, by means of its visual seductiveness, seeks to legitimize social inequities. (We will return to the matters of demystification and deconstruction in Chapter 7, when we look at the social historian's approach to artworks, on pages 185–91.)

We can grant that works of art are partly shaped by social and political forces (these are the subjects of historical and political approaches, discussed in Chapter 7); and we can grant that works of art are partly shaped by the artist's personality (the subject of psychoanalytical approaches, also discussed in Chapter 7). But this is only to say that works of art can be studied from several points of view; it does not invalidate the view that these works are also, at least in part, shaped by conscious intentions, and that the shapes or constructions that the artists (consciously or not) have produced convey a meaning.

STYLE AS THE SHAPER OF FORM

It is now time to define the elusive word **style.** The first thing to say is that the word is *not* used by most art historians to convey praise, as in "He has style." Rather, it is used neutrally, for everyone and everything made has a style—good, bad, or indifferent. The person who, as we say, "talks like a book" has a style (probably an annoying one), and the person who keeps saying "Uh, you know what I mean" has a style too (different, but equally annoying).

Similarly, whether we wear jeans or painter's pants or gray flannel slacks, we have a style in our dress. We may claim to wear any old thing, but in fact we don't; there are clothes we wouldn't be caught dead in. The clothes we wear are expressive; they announce that we are police officers or bankers or tourists or college students—or at least they show what we want to be thought to be, as when in the 1960s many young middle-class students wore tattered clothing, thus showing their allegiance to the poor and their enmity toward what was called the Establishment. It is not silly to think of our clothing as a sort of art that we make. Once we go beyond clothing as something that merely serves the needs of modesty and that provides protection against heat and cold and rain, we get clothing whose style is expressive.

To turn now to our central topic—style in art—we can all instantly tell the difference between a picture by van Gogh and one by Norman Rockwell or Walt Disney, even though the subject matter of all three pictures may be the same (e.g., a seated woman). How can we tell? By the style—that is, by line, color, medium, and all of the other things we talked about earlier in this chapter. Walt Disney's figures tend to be built up out of circles and ovals (think of Mickey Mouse), and the color shows no modeling or traces of brush strokes; Norman Rockwell's methods of depicting figures are different, and van Gogh's are different in yet other ways. Similarly, a Chinese landscape, painted with ink on silk or on paper, simply cannot look like a van Gogh landscape done with oil paint on canvas, partly because the materials prohibit such identity and partly because the Chinese painter's vision of landscape (usually lofty mountains) is not van Gogh's vision. Their works "say" different things. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it, "A change of style is a change of subject."

We recognize certain *distinguishing characteristics* (from large matters, such as choice of subject and composition, to small matters, such as kinds of brush strokes) that mark an artist, or a period, or a culture, and these constitute the style. Almost anyone can distinguish between a landscape painted by a traditional Chinese artist and one painted by van Gogh. But it takes considerable familiarity with van Gogh to be able to say of a work, "Probably 1888 or maybe 1889," just as it takes considerable familiarity with the styles of Chinese painters to be able to say, "This is a Chinese painting of the seventeenth century, in fact the late seventeenth century. It belongs to the Nanking School and is a work by Kung Hsien—not by a follower, and certainly not a copy, but the genuine article."

Style, then, is revealed in **form;** an artist creates form by applying certain techniques to certain materials, in order to embody a particular vision or content. In different ages people have seen things differently: the nude body as splendid, or the nude body as shameful; Jesus as majestic ruler, or Jesus as the sufferer on the cross; landscape as pleasant, domesticated countryside, or landscape as wild nature. So the chosen subject matter is not only part of the content but is also part of that assemblage of distinguishing characteristics that constitutes a style.

All of the elements of style, finally, are expressive. Take ceramics as an example. The kind of clay, the degree of heat at which it is baked, the decoration or glaze (if any), the shape of the vessel, the thickness of its wall, all are elements of the potter's style, and all contribute to the expressive form. But every expressive form is not available in every age; certain visions, and certain technologies, are, in certain ages, unavailable. Porcelain, as opposed to pottery, requires a particular kind of clay and an extremely high temperature in the kiln, and these were simply not available to the earliest Japanese potters. Even the potter's wheel was not available to them; they built their pots by coiling ropes of clay and then, sometimes, they smoothed the surface with a spatula. The result is a kind of thick-walled, low-fired ceramic that expresses energy and earthiness, far different from those delicate Chinese porcelains that express courtliness and the power of technology (or, we might say, of art).

SAMPLE ESSAY: A FORMAL ANALYSIS

The following sample essay, written by an undergraduate, includes a good deal of description (a formal analysis usually begins with a fairly full description of the artwork), and the essay is conspicuously impersonal (another characteristic of a formal analysis). But notice that even this apparently dispassionate assertion of facts is shaped by a **thesis.** If we stand back from the essay, we can see that the basic argument is this: The sculpture successfully combines a highly conventional symmetrical style, on the one hand, with mild asymmetry and a degree of realism, on the other.

Put thus, the thesis does not sound especially interesting, but that is because the statement is highly abstract, lacking in concrete detail. A writer's job is to take that idea (thesis) and to present it in an interesting and convincing way. In drafting and revising an essay, good writers keep thinking, "I want my readers to see. . . ." The idea will come alive for the reader when the writer supports it by calling attention to specific details—the evidence—as the student writer does in the following essay.

Notice, by the way, that in his first sentence the students refers to "Figure 1," which is a photograph of the work he discusses. (The images in an essay or book are called figures, and they are numbered consecutively.) This illustration originally appeared on a separate page at the end of the paper, but here it has been put before the essay.

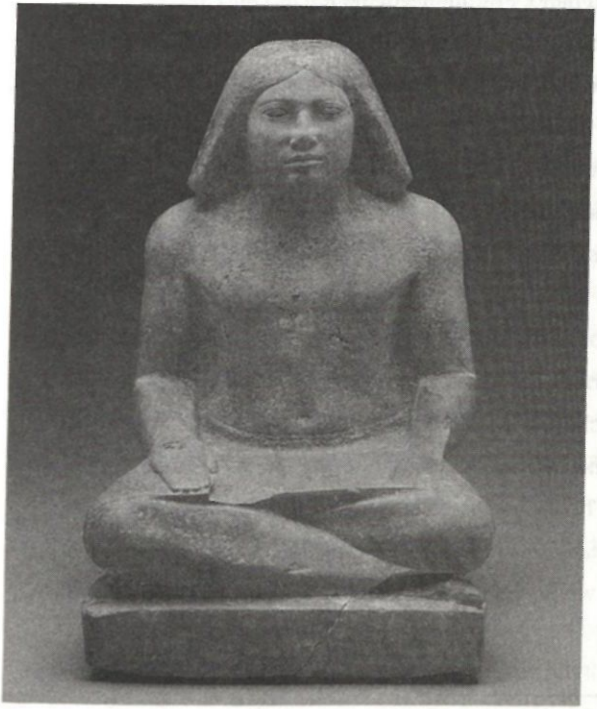

Figure 1. Egyptian, *Seated Statue of Prince Khunera as a Scribe*, 2548–2524 BC. Yellow limestone, 12″. (Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard-Boston Expedition)

more than he knew with his drip paintings, he clearly didn't know what else to say at the end of his life.

In retrospect, he had already, of course, said more than enough. "Jackson Pollock" opens on Sunday at the Museum of Modem Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, and remains through Feb. 2. It is sponsored by Bank of America.

5

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork.

—Peter de Vries

What is written without effort, in general is read without pleasure.

—Samuel Johnson

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

—Thomas Mann

THE BASIC STRATEGY

- Choose a topic and a tentative thesis
- Generate ideas, for instance by asking yourself questions
- Make a tentative outline of points you plan to make
- Rough out a first draft, working from your outline (don't worry about spelling, punctuation, etc.)
- Make large-scale revisions in your draft by reorganizing, or by adding details to clarify and support assertions, or by deleting or combining paragraphs
- Make small-scale revisions by revising and editing sentences
- Revise your opening and concluding paragraphs
- Have someone read your revised draft and comment on it
- Revise again, taking into account the reader's suggestions
- Read this latest version and make further revisions as needed
- Proofread your final version

All writers must work out their own procedures and rituals, but the following basic suggestions will help you write effective essays. They assume that you take notes on index cards, but you can easily adapt the principles if you use a laptop. If your paper involves using sources, consult also Chapter 9, "Writing a Research Paper."

LOOKING CLOSELY: APPROACHING A FIRST DRAFT

1. **Look at the work or works carefully.**

2. **Choose a worthwhile and compassable subject,** something that interests you and is not so big that your handling of it must be superficial. As you work, shape your topic, narrowing it, for example, from "Egyptian Sculpture" to "Black Africans in Egyptian Sculpture," or from "Frank Lloyd Wright's Development" to "Wright's Johnson Wax Company as an Anticipation of His Guggenheim Museum."

3. **Keep your purpose in mind.** Although your instructor may ask you, perhaps as a preliminary writing assignment, to jot down your early responses—your initial experience of the work—it is more likely that he or she will ask you to write an analysis in which you will connect details and draw inferences. Almost surely you will be asked to do more than report your responses or to write a description of an object; you probably will be expected to support a *thesis*, that is, to offer an *argument*. Obviously an essay that evaluates a work not only offers a judgment but also supports the judgment with evidence. Yet even a formal analysis presents an argument, holding that the work is constructed in such-and-such a way and that its meaning (or one of its meanings) is communicated by the relationships between the parts.

In thinking about your purpose, remember, too, that your *audience* will in effect determine the amount of detail that you must give. Although your instructor may in reality be your only reader, probably you should imagine that your audience consists of people pretty much like your classmates—intelligent, but not especially familiar with the topic on which you have recently become a specialist.

4. **Keep looking at the art** you are writing about (or reproductions of it), jotting down notes on all relevant matters.

- You can generate ideas by asking yourself questions such as those given on pages 44–95.
- As you look and think, reflect on your observations and record them.
- When you intend to write about an object in a museum that you are visiting, choose an object that is reproduced on a postcard:

the picture will help you to keep the object in mind when you are writing in your room.

- When you have an idea, jot it down; don't assume that you will remember it when you begin writing. A sheet of paper is good for initial jottings, but many people—if they are not taking notes on a word processor—find that it is easiest to use 4″ × 6″ cards.
- Put only one point on each card, and put a brief caption on the card (e.g., Site of *David*); later you can arrange the cards so that the relevant notes are grouped together.

5. **When taking notes from secondary sources, do not simply highlight or photocopy.**

- Take brief notes, *summarizing* important points and jotting down your own critiques of the material.
- Read the material analytically, thoughtfully, with an open mind and a questioning spirit.
- When you read in this attentive and tentatively skeptical way, you will find that the material is valuable not only for what it tells you but also for the ideas that you yourself produce in responding to it.

Writing your paper does not begin when you sit down to write a draft; rather, it begins when you write your first thoughtful notes.

6. **Sort out your note cards, putting together what belongs together.** Three separate cards with notes about the texture of the materials of a building, for instance, probably belong together. Reject cards irrelevant to your topic.

7. **Organize your packets of cards into a reasonable sequence.** Your cards contain ideas (or at least facts that you can think about); now the packets of cards have to be put into a coherent sequence. When you have made a tentative arrangement, review it; you may discover a better way to group your notes, and you may even want to add to them. If so, start reorganizing.

A tripartite organization usually works. For this structure, tentatively plan to devote your opening paragraph(s) to a statement of the topic or problem and a proposal of your hypothesis or thesis. The essay will then take this shape:

- a beginning, in which you identify the work(s) of art that you will discuss, giving the necessary background and, in a sentence or two, setting forth your underlying argument, your thesis

- a middle, in which you develop your argument, chiefly by offering evidence
- a conclusion, in which you wrap things up, perhaps by giving a more general interpretation or by setting your findings in a larger context. (On concluding paragraphs, see pages 180–181.)

In general, organize the material from the simple to the complex in order to ensure intelligibility. If, for instance, you are discussing the composition of a painting, it probably will be best to begin with the most obvious points and then to turn to the subtler but perhaps equally important ones. Similarly, if you are comparing two sculptures, it may be best to move from the most obvious contrasts to the least obvious. When you have arranged your notes into a meaningful sequence of packets, you have approximately divided your material into paragraphs.

8. **Get it down on paper.** Most essayists find it useful to jot down some sort of **outline,** a map indicating the main idea of each paragraph and, under each main idea, supporting details that give it substance. An outline—not necessarily anything highly formal, with capital and lowercase letters and roman and arabic numerals, but merely key phrases in some sort of order—will help you to overcome the paralysis called "writer's block" that commonly afflicts professional as well as student writers. For an example of a student's rough outline, see the jottings on pages 105–06 that were turned into an essay on the sculpture *Seated Statue of Prince Khunera as a Scribe.*

A page of paper with ideas in some sort of sequence, however rough, ought to encourage you that you do have something to say. And so, despite the temptation to sharpen another pencil or to have another cup of coffee or to get some new software, the best thing to do at this point is to follow the advice of Isaac Asimov, author of 225 books: "Sit down and start writing."

If you don't feel that you can work from note cards and a rough outline, try another method: Get something down on paper, writing (preferably on a word processor) freely, sloppily, automatically, or whatever, but allow your ideas about what the work means to you and how it conveys its meaning—rough as your ideas may be—to begin to take visible form. If you are like most people, you can't do much precise thinking until you have committed to paper at least a rough sketch of your initial ideas. Later you can push and polish your ideas into shape, perhaps even deleting all of them and starting over, but it's a lot easier to improve your ideas once you see them in front of you than it is to do the job in your head. On paper one word leads to another; in your head one word often blocks another.

Just keep going; you may realize, as you near the end of a sentence, that you no longer believe it. Okay; be glad that your first idea led you to a better one, and pick up your better one and keep going with it. What you are doing is, in a sense, by trial and error pushing your way not only toward clear expression but also toward sharper ideas and richer responses.

REVISING: ACHIEVING A READABLE DRAFT

Good writing is *re*writing. The evidence? Heavily annotated drafts by Chekhov, Hemingway, Tolstoy, Yeats, Woolf—almost any writer you can name. Of course it is easy enough to spill out words, but, as the dramatist Richard Sheridan said 200 years ago, "Easy writing's curst hard reading." Good writers find writing is difficult because they care; they care about making sense, so they will take time to find the exact word, the word that enables them to say precisely what they mean, so their readers will get it right. And they care about holding a reader's attention.

1. **Keep looking and thinking,** asking yourself questions and providing tentative answers, searching for additional material that strengthens or weakens your main point, and take account of it in your outline or draft.

Now is probably the time to think about a title for your essay. It is usually a good idea to let your reader know what your topic is—which works of art you will discuss—and what your approach is, for instance, "A Formal Analysis of *Prince Khunera as a Scribe,*" or "Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait as a Priest:* A Psychoanalytic Approach." At this stage your title is still tentative, but thinking about a title will help you to organize your thoughts and to determine which of your notes are relevant and which are not. Remember, the title that you settle on is the first part of the paper that your reader encounters. You will gain the reader's goodwill by providing a helpful, interesting title.

2. **With your outline or draft in front of you, write a more lucid version,** checking your notes for fuller details. At this stage it is probably best to concentrate on *large-scale revisions*—reorganization, additions (for instance, you may now see that you need to define a term, or to give an example), and deletions (you may see that some sentences or paragraphs are redundant or irrelevant).

If you find that some of the points in your earlier jottings are no longer relevant, eliminate them; but make sure that the argument flows from one point to the next. It is not enough to keep your thesis in mind: you must keep it in the reader's mind. As you write, your ideas will doubtless become clearer, and some may prove to be poor ideas. (We rarely know exactly what our ideas are until we set them down on paper. As the little girl said, replying to the suggestion that she should think before she spoke, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?") Not until you have written a draft do you really have a strong sense of what you feel and know, and of how good your essay may be.

If you have not already made an outline at this stage, it is probably advisable to make one, to ensure that your draft is reasonably organized. Jot down, in sequence, each major point and each subpoint. You may find that some points need amplification, or that a point made on page 3 really ought to go on page 1.

Later you will concern yourself with *small-scale revisions* (polishing sentences, clarifying transitions, varying sentence structure if necessary, checking spelling and documentation).

3. **After a suitable interval, preferably a few days, again revise and edit the draft.** To write a good essay you must be a good reader of the essay you are writing. We're not talking at this stage about proofreading or correcting spelling errors, though you will need to do that later. Van Gogh said, "One becomes a painter by painting." Similarly, one becomes a writer by writing—and by rewriting, or revising. In revising their work, writers ask themselves such questions as

- Do I mean what I say?
- Do I say what I mean? (Answering this question will cause you to ask yourself such questions as, Do I need to define my terms? add examples to clarify? reorganize the material so that a reader can grasp it?)

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Put yourself in the reader's shoes to make sure that the paper not only has an organization but that the organization will be clear to your reader. If you imagine a classmate as the reader of the draft, you may find that you need to add transitions, clarify definitions, and provide additional supporting evidence.

During this part of the process of writing, read the draft in a skeptical frame of mind. In taking account of your doubts, you will probably unify, organize, clarify, and polish the draft.

- **Unity** is achieved partly by eliminating irrelevancies. These may be small (a sentence or two) or large (a paragraph or even a page or two). You wrote the material and you are fond of it, but if it is irrelevant you must delete it.
- **Organization** is largely a matter of arranging material into a sequence that will assist the reader to grasp the point. If you reread your draft and jot down a paragraph outline—a series of sentences, one under the other, each sentence summarizing one paragraph—you can then see if the draft has a reasonable organization, a structure that will let the reader move easily from the beginning to the end.
- **Clarity** is achieved largely by providing concrete details, examples, and quotations to support generalizations, and by providing helpful transitions ("for instance," "furthermore," "on the other hand," "however").
- **Polish** is small-scale revision. Delete unnecessary repetitions, combine choppy sentences into longer sentences, and break overly long sentences into shorter sentences.

If you have written your draft on a word processor, do *not* try to revise it on the monitor. Print the entire draft, and then read it—as your reader will be reading it—page by page, not screen by screen. Almost surely you will detect errors in a hard copy that you miss on the screen. Only by reading the printed copy will you be able to see if, for instance, paragraphs are too long.

After producing a draft that seems good enough to show to someone, writers engage in yet another activity. They edit. **Editing** includes such work as checking the accuracy of quotations by comparing them with the original, checking a dictionary for the spelling of doubtful words, and checking a handbook for doubtful punctuation—for instance, whether a comma or a semicolon is needed in a particular sentence.

PEER REVIEW

Your instructor may encourage (or even require) you to discuss your draft with another student or with a small group of students. That is, you may be asked to get a review from your peers. Such a procedure is helpful in several ways. First, it gives the writer a real audience, readers who can point to what pleases or puzzles them, who make suggestions, who may often disagree (with the writer or with each other), and who frequently, though not intentionally, *misread*. Though writers don't necessarily like everything they hear (they seldom hear "This is perfect. Don't change a word!"), reading and discussing their work with others almost always gives them a fresh perspective on their work, and a fresh perspective may stimulate thoughtful revision. (Having your intentions *misread*, because your writing isn't clear enough, can be particularly stimulating.)

✔ Checklist for Peer Review

Read each draft once, quickly. Then read it again and jot down brief responses to the following questions.

- ✔ What is the essay's topic? Is it one of the assigned topics, or a variation of one of them? Is the title appropriate? Does the draft show promise of fulfilling the assignment?
- ✔ Looking at the essay as a whole, what thesis (main idea) is stated or implied? If implied, try to state it in your own words.
- ✔ Is the thesis plausible? How might it be strengthened?
- ✔ Looking at each paragraph separately:
    - ✔ What is the basic point?
    - ✔ How does each paragraph relate to the essay's main idea or to the previous paragraph?
    - ✔ Should some paragraphs be deleted? be divided into two or more paragraphs? be combined? be put elsewhere? (If you outline the essay by jotting down the gist of each paragraph, you will get help in answering these questions.)
    - ✔ Is each sentence clearly related to the sentence that precedes and to the sentence that follows?
    - ✔ Is each paragraph adequately developed? Are there sufficient details to support the generalizations?
    - ✔ Are the introductory and concluding paragraphs effective?
- ✔ Are the necessary illustrations included, and are they adequately identified?
- ✔ What are the paper's chief strengths?
- ✔ Make at least two specific suggestions that you think will assist the author to improve the paper.

The writer whose work is being reviewed is not the sole beneficiary. When students regularly serve as readers for each other, they become bet-

A RULE FOR WRITERS (ATTRIBUTED TO TRUMAN CAPOTE):

Good writing is rewriting.

ter readers of their own work and consequently better revisers. And, as you probably know, learning to write is in large measure learning to read.

If peer review is a part of the writing process in your course, the instructor may distribute a sheet with suggestions and questions. The preceding checklist is an example of such a sheet.

PREPARING THE FINAL VERSION

1. **If you have received comments from a reader, consider them carefully.** Even if you disagree with them, they may alert you to places in your essay that need revision, such as clarification.

In addition, if a friend, a classmate, or another peer reviewer has given you some help, acknowledge that help in a footnote or endnote. (If you look at almost any book or any article in *The Art Bulletin* you will notice that the author acknowledges the help of friends and colleagues. In your own writing follow this practice.) Here are sample acknowledgments from papers by students:

> I wish to thank Anna Aaron for numerous valuable suggestions.
>
> I wish to thank Paul Gottsegen for calling my attention to passages that needed clarification, and Jane Leslie for suggesting the comparison with Orozco's murals at Dartmouth College.
>
> Emily Andrews called my attention to recent studies of Mayan art.
>
> I am indebted to Louise Cort for explaining how Shigaraki ceramics were built and fired.

2. **Write, type, or print a clean copy,** following the principles concerning margins, pagination, footnotes, and so on, set forth in Chapter 9. If you have borrowed any ideas, be sure to give credit, usually in footnotes, to your sources. Remember that plagiarism is not limited to the unacknowledged borrowing of words; a borrowed idea, even when put into your own words, requires acknowledgment. (On giving credit to sources, see pages 279–281.)

3. **Proofread and make corrections** as explained on page 304.

In short, ask these questions:

- Is the writing true (do you have a point that you state accurately)?
- Is the writing good (do your words and your organization clearly and effectively convey your meaning)?

All of this adds up to a recipe in a famous Victorian cookbook: "First catch your hare, then cook it."

6

STYLE IN WRITING

Style is character.

—Joan Didion

To me, style is first the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and inside of the human body—both go together, they can't be separated.

—Jean-Luc Godard

PRINCIPLES OF STYLE

Writing is hard work (Lewis Carroll's school in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* taught reeling and writhing), and there is no point in fooling ourselves into believing that it is all a matter of inspiration. Many of the books that seem, as we read them, to flow so effortlessly were in fact the product of innumerable revisions. "Hard labor for life" was Joseph Conrad's view of his career as a writer. This labor, for the most part, is not directed to prettifying language but to improving one's thoughts and then getting the words that communicate these thoughts exactly. There is no guarantee that effort will pay off, but failure to expend effort is sure to result in writing that will strike the reader as confused. It won't do to comfort yourself with the thought that you have been misunderstood. You may know what you *meant to say*, but your reader is the judge of what indeed you *have said*. Keep in mind Henri Matisse's remark: "When my words were garbled by critics or colleagues, I considered it my fault, not theirs, because I had not been clear enough to be comprehended."

Many books have been written on the elements of good writing, but the best way to learn to write is to do your best, show it to a friend, think about the response and revise accordingly, revise it a few days later, hand it in, and then study the annotations an experienced reader puts on your essay. In revising the annotated passages, you will learn what your weaknesses are in writing. After drafting your next essay, put it aside for a day or