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Anne D'Alleva

Look!

The Fundamentals of Art History

Prentice Hall Inc. Upper Saddle River, NJ. 07458

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has provided you with a better understanding of what art history is and how it differs from other academic disciplines. As the great athlete Yogi Berra put it, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll end up somewhere else.” As you advance in the study of art history, in addition to formal and contextual analysis, you’ll learn to use theoretical models, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and semiotics, that approach interpretation in specialized ways. But for now, thinking in terms of formal and contextual analysis may help you ask a full range of questions when you’re interpreting works of art. The next two chapters will examine these fundamental methods of art history in more depth.

Chapter 2

Formal analysis

Looking isn't as easy as it looks
Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), artist

In our culture, we are so constantly bombarded by visual images in television, movies, billboards, books, and magazines, that it’s easy to develop habits of lazy looking. We’re often on such visual overload that we don’t take the time to examine images carefully and analyze what we’re seeing. This chapter explains the basic art-historical method of formal analysis, which will help you to look carefully and frame good questions as you interpret works of art.

Formal analysis

Formal analysis doesn’t mean simply describing what you see in a work of art, although description is part of it. It means looking at the work of art to try to understand what the artist wants to convey visually. In a sense, there’s no such thing as pure formal analysis, totally divorced from contextual analysis. This is because you, the viewer, do provide a kind of context. The way that you interpret things is based on who you are—a person living in your place and time, with your education and experiences—and that inevitably shapes your interpretation. There are certain basic characteristics of works of art that you will focus on in formal analysis, such as color, line, space and mass, and scale. Often, these visual or physical qualities

of the work are most effectively discussed in terms of a sliding scale between pairs of opposite qualities, such as linearity vs. painterliness, flatness vs. three-dimensionality, or dark vs. light. You can find brief definitions of a range of specialized terms used in describing art in the Glossary on pages 164–165.

When you're engaged in formal analysis, remember that works of art change with the passage of time. Be sure that you're not ascribing visual or physical characteristics to the work that it didn't have at the time it was made. For example, although we now see the Parthenon as an austere, white marble structure, it was originally decorated with red, blue, and yellow paint, and polished bronze disks. The bright colors revealed when the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes were cleaned in the 1980s have radically altered our understanding of Michelangelo's work. A wooden mask from New Guinea may have originally borne decorations made of shells, feathers, leaves, or pigments. When you're not sure about changes over time in the work of art, you may want to consult outside sources rather than working purely from your visual experience.

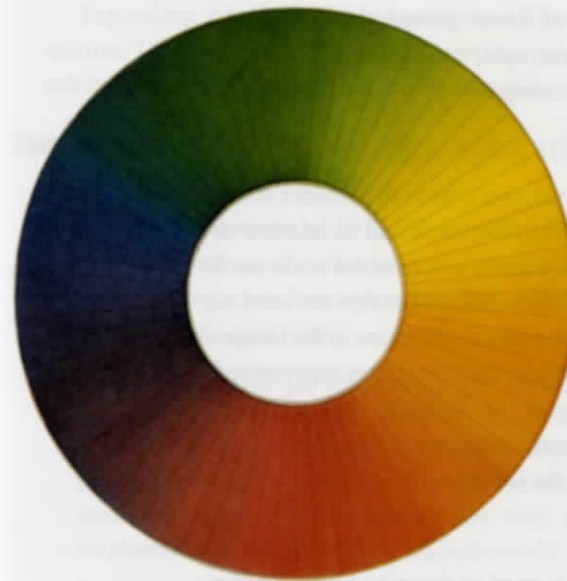
Formal elements

Color

The first, basic step to undertake in analyzing color is to identify the different hues (red, blue, green, etc.) that an artist uses and see whether she is using a particular range of colors (e.g. primary colors, secondary colors) (Figure 2.1). You would also look at the characteristics of each color used. If it appears to be a representation of the color in its most vivid form, as it is represented on the color chart, it is highly saturated. If the hue can hardly be distinguished, then it is of low saturation. Value is a term that describes the relative lightness of a color—whether it tends more toward white or more toward black.

Line

Although the concept of line may seem to belong most obviously to painting and graphic arts, it's also a useful



2.1 The Color Wheel

This color wheel by Eugène Chevreul divides the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—into 72 parts to show how these colors meld to produce the secondary mixtures of orange, green, and violet.

term in thinking about three-dimensional media such as sculpture and architecture. In discussing two-dimensional media, art historians often talk about linearity vs. painterliness, distinguishing between works that emphasize line and linear contours as compared with those that emphasize the play of light and dark. You might ask whether the line is strong and continuous, or broken up into many small hatches or pieces. For a building or sculpture, ask whether there is a strong sense of silhouette (the outline of the exterior contours) or whether the outline is broken up so that the viewer has little sense of it.

Space and mass

The term “space” indicates whether an image conveys a sense of three-dimensional space. The term “mass” describes the space created by an artwork, indicating whether the artwork conveys a sense of substantial form—as if it had weight or volume. These are actual characteristics of sculpture, architecture, and installations, but projected or illusory characteristics of two-dimensional media such as painting, drawing, printmaking, and

photography. The use of linear perspective or atmospheric perspective, for example, can establish a sense of spatial recession in a painting.

Scale

As part of a formal analysis, you'll want to consider scale, or relative size, both within the work and in relation to the viewer. Determine if there's a consistent scale used within the work, or whether different scales are used to emphasize or deemphasize certain elements in the image. Figures of gods, for example, are sometimes represented larger than other figures to indicate their divinity. Consider whether the image is monumental, life-size, or miniature in relation to the viewer.

Composition

The term composition is used to describe how an artist puts together all the above elements in the work of art. In a formal analysis, you will ask how these elements—line, color, space and mass, scale—contribute to the work's overall composition and its visual effect.

Initially, you'll be trying to answer some basic questions:

- ▶ What does the artist emphasize visually? What first attracts the viewer's attention?
- ▶ How does the artist emphasize this feature/these features visually? Through scale, line, color, etc?
- ▶ Is there an underlying rhythm, pattern, or geometric structure to the composition?
- ▶ Does the composition seem unified; that is, do the elements appear integrated or separate and distinct from each other?
- ▶ How can the emotion or idea evoked by this piece be described? How is this achieved visually?
- ▶ What is the viewer's position in relation to the work? Is the composition large- or small-scale? Is it horizontal or vertical in orientation? How do these characteristics alter the viewer's perception of the work?
- ▶ Is the work figurative or abstract?

Expanding on these basic questions about composition, I'll provide some specific questions you might ask in analyzing works of art in different media.

Two-dimensional art: painting, graphic arts, photography

A number of questions address the specific qualities of two-dimensional works—that is, works characterized by length and height, such as a painting, but of little depth (or three-dimensional form).

- ▶ How is color used? Are colors saturated? Where are the brightest colors? The darkest colors? Is there a wide range of colors or a narrow range of colors? Do the colors contrast or blend? Do the colors create a sense of calm or a sense of drama and excitement? Are they used to emphasize certain forms or elements in the work?
- ▶ Can you see the marks of the tools—pencil, brush, burin? Does the work seem highly finished or rough and unfinished? How do these qualities contribute to the overall effect of the work?
- ▶ Is there a strong contrast between areas of light and dark? Does this help to create the illusion of three-dimensional forms existing in space, or do the elements of the painting remain flat, emphasizing the picture plane?
- ▶ Does the artist try to create an illusion of depth, or does he or she use techniques to make the viewer aware of the picture plane?
- ▶ How are forms defined—through line or shading?
- ▶ Is there a sense of texture or a smooth surface?

Let's explore some of these issues of color, surface, and composition in *Marilyn (Vanitas)* by Audrey Flack (b. 1931) (Figure 2.2). Flack used a mechanical airbrush, rather than a conventional bristle brush, to achieve remarkably intense colors and a smooth surface. She employed the full spectrum of primary and secondary colors: yellow, orange, red, green, blue, and purple. Highly saturated colors predominate, although several hues are represented in multiple shades. The saturated red of the cloth in the foreground, for example, is set off



2.2 Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, 1977. Oil over acrylic on canvas. University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson.

A formal analysis wouldn't address the many provocative contextual questions raised by this image. In the tradition of European vanitas imagery, several elements in the painting refer to the passage of time (watch, calendar, hourglass, candle). The mirror, jewelry, and cosmetics allude to the particular ways that women fight the passage of time.

by the different shades and hues of pink in the hourglass, rose, and makeup. There is little sense of depth, for the elements of the composition crowd up against the picture plane. Despite this, the elements are not flat; instead, they appear as fully modeled, three-dimensional forms, as if they might pop out of the picture plane. The smoothness of the airbrushed surface enhances these illusionistic effects.

Although this image first strikes the viewer as a random profusion of brightly colored objects, in fact the composition is tightly constructed in three bands. An array of objects is set against a red cloth in the foreground. The middle register is occupied by the black-

and-white pages of an open book and three sepia-toned photographs, their starkness relieved by the touches of color provided by a pink rose and pots of cosmetics. The upper register is occupied by the more muted presence of a purple cloth, green grapes, and buff-colored calendar, which frame and set off the objects below. The large size of the image, 8 feet (2.4 metres) square, means that this array of intensely colored, three-dimensional forms almost overwhelms the viewer. The composition creates an image that is rich and lustrous, yet at the same time somewhat threatening.

Now let's explore some of the distinctive compositional effects achieved in printmaking. In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) used two techniques, etching and aquatint, to achieve both linear and tonal effects (Figure 2.3). The aquatint process, in which powdered resin is sprinkled on the plate before it is placed in an acid bath, produces grainy areas of tone. The etching process, in which the entire plate is coated with resin, and lines are drawn in the resin with needles, produces lines of various width. Goya used



2.3 Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, no. 43 from *Los Caprichos*, 1796–8. Etching and aquatint. The Hispanic Society of America, New York.

these techniques to produce a visually dramatic and unsettling image full of contrasts of light and shade, tone and line. The aquatint background suggests a murky atmosphere. Bats—rendered with dense, inky black lines—emerge from the gloom. The sleeping figure slumps over his desk. His back and shoulders, delineated with nervous etched lines, seem to be bathed in a glaring light, created by leaving these areas of paper unprinted.

Sculpture

Sculpture can be either freestanding or relief, which means projecting from a surface like a wall or stone slab. There are a number of processes for making sculpture, including additive processes, in which the sculpture is built up, or modeled, from material like clay; subtractive processes, like carving stone or wood, in which material is taken away to create an image; and casting, in which molten metal is poured into a mold.

The following basic questions will help you address three-dimensional forms:

- ▶ What is the viewpoint suggested by the work? Does the sculpture visually lead the viewer to move around it and view it from different angles, or does it seem to guide the viewer to one position?
- ▶ What materials are used? How do they contribute to the work's form? Do the materials make open spaces within the sculpture possible, or do they require a more block-like form?
- ▶ Does the sculpture emphasize a sense of volume, of three-dimensional form, or of flatness?
- ▶ Does the sculpture use the play of light over the surface to create a pattern of lights and shadows? Does this emphasize the three-dimensional form or flatness? Does it create a sense of drama or movement?
- ▶ If the surface of the sculpture is colored, how does that affect the viewer's perception of the work? Does color serve to emphasize certain features of the work? Does it make the work seem more or less three-dimensional?
- ▶ What is the texture of the surface? Is it smooth or rough, dull or shiny?

Let's compare two sculptures (Figures 2.8, 2.9) to explore some of these issues. One is an Aztec stone figure depicting the goddess Coatlique, the other a bronze figure depicting Apollo by the Renaissance artist Giovanni da Bologna (1529–1608). Although both portray anthropomorphic figures of gods, they do so in very different ways. (Note that this analysis uses a basic piece of contextual information, the identification of each figure, as a starting point for a more insightful formal interpretation.)



2.8 The mother goddess, Coatlique, Aztec, 15th century. Stone. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

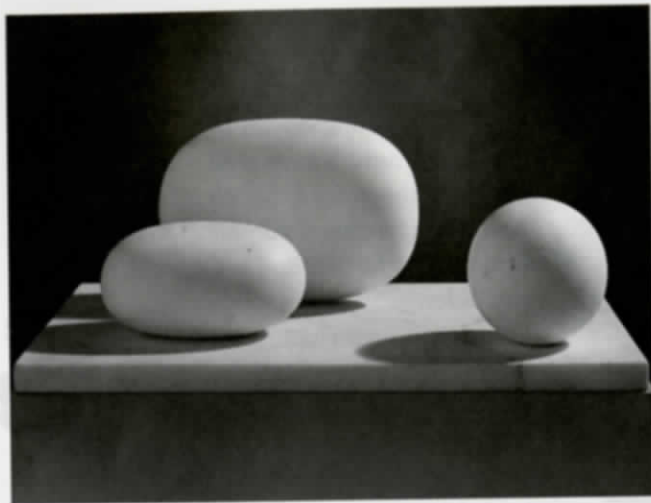
Coatlique is a massive stone sculpture with a frontal orientation, showing bilateral symmetry along a vertical axis. The frontality demands that the viewer stand before the sculpture rather than walk around it or see it from multiple angles. The supernatural nature of Coatlique, the earth goddess, is indicated by the composition of the body. The head is formed of two rattlesnake heads, and the feet have feline claws. She wears a pendant in the form of a human head strung on a necklace of hands and hearts, and a skirt of entwined snakes, further emphasizing her divinity and striking fear in the viewer.

In contrast, the figure of Apollo appears godlike through the perfection of his human form. The graceful, rhythmic positioning of the Apollo's limbs, turn of the head, and twist of the torso lead the viewer's eye around the figure. While the statue of Coatlique is solid and block-like, with few freely carved parts, the Apollo incorporates space within the figure, and the limbs are all separately articulated. The figure of the Apollo contrasts smooth stretches of flesh, characterized by a lustrous



2.9 Giovanni da Bologna, Apollo, 1573–5. Bronze. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

A mechanical device turned the Apollo in its niche so viewers could see it from every angle.



2.10 Barbara Hepworth, *Three Forms*, 1935. Marble. Tate Gallery, London.

bronze surface, with intricately detailed and textured areas, such as the hair, the robe draped over the lyre, and the lyre itself. He appears supernaturally elegant, graceful, and energetic.

Students beginning art history often find abstract art very challenging to interpret, so I'll briefly discuss an abstract work, *Three Forms* by Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) of 1935 (Figure 2.10). Abstraction can occur in different art forms, so there's no particular significance to discussing it under sculpture rather than two-dimensional art. ~~In abstract art the image does not directly represent observed reality.~~ Abstract forms can be either purely geometric and non-figurative, or a reduction of observed forms into fundamental patterns or shapes. Hepworth's sculpture, for example, incorporates three marble elements of different shapes and sizes. One is spherical and spatially separate from the other two, which are oriented horizontally and rather elongated. These three elements can be seen as perfectly non-representational, a subtle meditation on the interrelation of geometric forms in space. At the same time, they can be interpreted as a distilled landscape, or even a figure (the sphere) in a landscape. Abstraction often exists on a continuum—that is, artworks are often neither

completely abstract nor completely figurative. So, when analyzing abstract works, take the time you need to see their more subtle aspects.

Architecture

Architecture demands that the viewer take into account both the physical and visual experience of the building and the spaces it creates. In discussing architecture, you may want to talk about the plan (or layout) of a building; an elevation (the side of a building); or the section (an imaginary vertical slice through the building). The following questions will be useful.

- ▶ What is the scale of the building in relation to humans?
- ▶ What parts of the building seem to be emphasized? Is the system of design readily apparent? Does the building appear to be composed of geometric or more organic (soft and curving) forms?
- ▶ Does the building seem accessible to the viewer from the outside? How large and visible are doors and windows?
- ▶ Does the building convey a sense of solidity or of the interplay of solids and negative spaces? Do the forms of the building use light and shadow to break up the sense of solidity? Is there a play of light and dark across the surface?
- ▶ How are ornaments used on the building? Do the ornaments enhance the viewer's awareness of three-dimensional form, or do they emphasize the building's surface?
- ▶ How does the building fit its environment? Does it seem to be distinct from or part of its surroundings? How does it change the viewer's perception of those surroundings?
- ▶ Is the interior divided into rooms or is it one open space? How does the arrangement of interior spaces either help to move the viewer through the building, or hinder the viewer's movement through the building? Which spaces are readily accessible and which are remote or blocked off?
- ▶ Is there a range of large and small spaces within the building? More or less elaborate spaces? Which spaces are most accessible?

Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House provides an opportunity to consider some of these questions (see