

## Formal/Visual Analysis of Works of Art

A work of art is the product of the dynamic relationships between the elements of art and principles used by the artist. As you engage with an artwork, ask yourself why the artist made the choices they did. By considering the elements and principles involved, you can make yourself look more closely at the work of art, and thus understand more fully the artist's intended vision. This will also help you notice how the work reflects the time and place where it was created.

### Elements of Art

**Line:** What type(s) of line are used? Do you see any outlines that define objects, shapes, or forms? Are lines used to emphasize a direction (vertical, horizontal, diagonal)? Describe the important lines: are they straight or curved, short or long, thick or thin? How do you think the artist utilized line to focus attention on certain objects, forms, or people? Are any invisible lines implied? For example, is a hand pointing, is the path of a figure's gaze creating a psychological line, or is linear perspective used? Do the lines themselves have an expressive quality, as in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*?

**Light/Value:** How has the artist used light or value? Is there a full range of values? If the work is a two-dimensional object, is a source of light depicted or implied? Is the light source natural or artificial? Do the shadows created by the light appear true to life, or has the artist distorted them? If the object shown is three-dimensional, how does it interact with the light in its setting? How do gradations of shadows and highlights create form or depth, emphasis or order in the composition? Is the piece high contrast? Low contrast? Does this affect the image and how we respond to it? What technique to create value is used (hatching, chiaroscuro, etc.)? Does the use of values create depth or add to the mood of the painting?

**Color:** Which colors are predominantly used in this depiction? If the object is black and white, or shades of gray, did the artist choose to do this because of the media he or she was working in, or do such shades create a certain mood or effect? Color can best be described by its hue, tone, and intensity (the hue is its basic shade, for example blue or red). Does the artist's choice of color create a certain mood? Does he or she make use of complementary colors—red/green, violet/yellow, blue/orange—or analogous ones (those next to each other on the color wheel such as blue and purple or red and orange)? Does the artist utilize colors that are "warm" or "cool"? In which parts of the work? Is color used more expressively? Does the use of color affect the mood of the painting?

**Texture:** What is the actual texture on the surface of the object? Is it rough or smooth? What created this texture? Did the artist create implied texture? Did the artist create the illusion of hair, skin, glass, metal, grass, fur, velvet, etc.? What technique did they use to create this implied texture?

**Shape:** What shapes do you see? If the work has a flat surface, are the shapes shown on it two-dimensional, or are they made to appear (illusionistically) three-dimensional or volumetric? If the work is a three-dimensional object, how volumetric is its shape? Is it nearly flat, or does it have substantial mass? Is the shape organic (seemingly from nature) or geometric? In representations of people, how does shape lend character to a figure? Are these figures proud or timid, strong or weak, beautiful or grotesque? How is negative space used?

**Mass/volume:** Is a sense of mass or volume expressed in the work? How so? Does this affect how we read the image?

**Space:** Has the artist created a sense of space or illusion of space? How so? How does the artist create depth in the image (by means of layering figures/objects, linear perspective, atmospheric perspective, foreshortening of figures)?

Do the shapes fill the space of the composition? Is there negative, or empty, space without objects in it?

If the artwork is three-dimensional, how does it fill our space? Is it our size, or does it dwarf us? If the piece is two-dimensional, is the space flat, or does it visually project into ours? Is the sculpture in a public space? Where is it? How does this affect your viewing of it?

**Time & motion:** Has the artist used actual time or motion in the piece? Or have they implied the passage of time or a feeling of movement? How does this engage the viewer? Or why might there be no feeling of time or movement?

## Principles of Art

Artists utilize the elements of art to produce these design principles.

**Emphasis/Focal Point:** The emphasis of a work refers to a focal point in the image or object. What is your eye drawn to? What is the focal point? Why? Does the artist create tension or intrigue us by creating more than one area of interest? Or is the work of art afocal — that is, the viewer cannot find a particular place to rest the eye?

**Scale and Proportion:** What is the size of all the forms and how do they relate proportionally to one another? Did the artist create objects larger in scale in order to emphasize them? Or was scale used to create depth? Are objects located in the foreground, middle ground, or background? Look at the scale of the artwork itself. Is it larger or smaller than you expected?

**Balance:** Balance is produced by the visual weight of shapes and forms within a composition. Balance can be symmetrical—in which each side of an artwork is the same—or asymmetrical. Asymmetrical balance is when one side of the composition is visually “heavier” than the other. There might be more objects on one side, for example.

Radial balance is when the elements appear to radiate from a central point. How are opposites—light/shadow, straight/curved lines, complimentary colors—used to balance the piece?

**Rhythm:** Rhythm is created by repetition. What repeated elements do you see? Does the repetition create a subtle pattern, a decorative ornamentation? Or does it create an intensity, a tension? Does the rhythm unify the work or create separate parts of the composition?

**Unity/Variety:** Is the artwork unified or cohesive? How does the artist use the elements to achieve this? Or is there diversity in the use of elements that creates variety (variety in colors, shapes, textures, etc.)? How does the artwork combine aspects of unity and variety?

## **Media and Technique**

Is the object two- or three-dimensional?

What medium and technique was used? (for example: oil painting on canvas, with impasto brushstrokes)

What limitations, if any, might the chosen medium create for the artist?

**Painting:** How did the type of paint affect the strokes the artist could make? Was it fresco, oil, tempera, or watercolor? Was it a fast-drying paint that allowed little time to make changes? What kind of textures and lines was the artist able to create with this medium? Does it lend a shiny or flat look? How durable was the medium? Does the work look the same today as when the artist painted it?

**Drawing:** Consider the materials utilized: metal point, chalk, charcoal, graphite, crayon, pastel, ink, and wash. Is the artist able to make controlled strokes with this medium? Would the tool create a thick or thin, defined or blurred line? Was the drawing intended to be a work of art in itself, or is it a study for another work, a peek into the artist's creative process?

**Printmaking:** What is the process the artist undertook to create this work? Did he or she need to carve or etch? Did the medium require a steady hand? Strength, or patience? Did this technique give the artist more or less options than if they chose a drawing or painting technique?

**Sculpture:** Is the sculpture high or low relief, or can we see it in the round? What challenges did the material present to the artist? Was the work created through a subtractive process (beginning with a large mass of the medium and taking away from it to create form), or an additive one? What tools did the artist use to create the form? If the form is human, is it life-size?

## **Modes of Analysis**

**Content:** Does the work clearly depict objects or people as we would recognize them in the world around us (is it representational)? Alternatively, is its subject matter completely unrecognizable (is it non-objective)? To what degree has the artist simplified, emphasized, or distorted aspects of forms in the work (or abstracted it)?

**Iconographic analysis:** Are there things in the work that you can interpret as signs or symbols? For example, is there anything that suggests a religious meaning, or indicates the social status of somebody depicted in the work? Labels often provide good information about iconography.

**Biographical analysis:** Would information about the life of the artist help you to interpret the work? What do you know about the artist already? Does this give you insight into the meaning or style of the artwork?

**Contextual analysis:** Would you understand the work better if you knew something about the history of the era in which it was created, or about religious, political, economic, and social issues that influenced its creation?

## Analyzing the art:

What is the meaning/story of this painting?

Is there a mood or story you imagine when viewing it? What gives you this feeling?

Does the artwork demonstrate technical excellence?

Does this artist show honesty?

Does the content reflect universal truth about the experience of being human?

Does the medium/technique amplify the message?