

## Visual Analysis: A Quick Guide

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How does one talk about art? Engaging with art can be a highly personal and emotional experience; on the other hand, we may also be unsure on what to make of art done in unfamiliar styles. While these initial reactions are valuable, how can we understand an artwork's effect on its viewer, and relate to an artist's skill?

Discussing a work of art is not merely based in subjective impressions. *Rather, it is a process that is supported by visual observation and analysis.* By accurately describing what we see, we can better understand an artist's visual language, and how it creates particular effects. Visual analysis allows us to approach artworks both familiar and foreign, by taking a step back to observe, before making an informed interpretation.

Following are three steps that outline a possible approach to engaging with a work of art.

### 1. Describing the artwork (gathering evidence)

Begin by observing the artwork for formal elements and what it depicts. What visual language does the artist employ? In this step, we *gather evidence* to interpret the artwork.

- What is the subject matter of the artwork? Who/what does it depict?
- What is the genre and medium? What conventions should we be aware of?
- How should the viewer interact with the artwork? Should they view it from a distance? Are they invited to physically interact with it?
- What is the current condition of the artwork? Is it in its complete form? Are there damaged/missing parts? Are the colors intact, or are they faded?

For a more detailed list of formal elements and vocabulary that can be used to discuss visual art, please refer to the handout *Close Reading Visual Art*.

### 2. Analyzing effects within the context of the artwork

Based on the observations made in Step 1, how does the visual language in the artwork create specific effects in the viewing experience? At this stage, we are concerned with interpreting observations within the context of the artwork. In this step, we *interpret* the evidence gathered to move towards a thesis on the artwork's effects.

- How are the subjects portrayed? Are they the focus of attention? Are they shown in a positive/negative light?
- How does the work guide the viewing experience? For instance, how do elements such as line and color guide the eye to move across the artwork?
- How does the artwork situate the viewer? Does it prescribe a certain perspective? What effect does this achieve?

- It may also be helpful to think about any initial reactions that the artwork may have evoked. What elements help to create these reactions?

### 3. Analyzing the *so what*: the artwork in its context

Since art is hardly ever created in a vacuum, interpreting the artwork in relation to its sociopolitical and historical contexts, and the circumstances of its production, is crucial to our understanding. In this step, we *reflect* on the larger contexts and conversations that may impact what we have interpreted in Step 2, to move towards a thesis that reflects on an artwork's larger themes and implications.

- What were the trends surrounding the production and circulation of art? Was there a high demand amongst a rising urban class? Was there a robust publishing industry?
- What technologies (e.g. synthetic pigments, optical lenses) could the artist access?
- How does the artwork figure in the artist's oeuvre?
- Where does the work lie in art history? Does it come from a particular movement?
- How is the artwork situated in relation to the artist's contemporaries?
- What/who does the artist emulate, what are their sources of inspiration?  
What does the artist seek to subvert through the artwork?
- Are there details from their personal lives that may suggest a certain aesthetic preoccupation?