

Visual Analysis: Sample Paragraphs

by *Chrystal Ho*

This handout annotates sample paragraphs, taken from visual analysis assignments from YHU2267 Modern Art in East Asia. The complete essays can be found in the Writers' Centre, along with the following handouts: *Visual Analysis: A Quick Guide* and *Close Reading Visual Art*.

Assignment Type: Close Analysis Prompt

This prompt requires students to engage in a visual analysis of *Red Plum Blossoms* (1916) by Wu Changshi, a Chinese painter who primarily works with ink on paper.

Assignment goal: describe in detail what is depicted in the artwork.

Sample Paragraph 1: Close Analysis of Technique

Other than the outline of the petals using black ink, there is not a significant amount of linear information in the painting, as the branches in the foreground are depicted by applying pressure to the brush to create a wash of ink, rather than outlining and then coloring in. These brushstrokes appear to have been laid down with a heavy hand, hence the texture of the brush hairs have transferred onto the work in the form of uneven and patchy lines in some places. This allows the painter to represent the uneven and knobby texture of plum branches in reality, which might have been done by shading in Western art. This play on the pressure of brushstrokes is used in

Visual observations on lack of linear information, and use of brush pressure to depict petals

Interpreting effect of brush pressure in painting observations from nature, **interpretation** in relation to other artistic traditions

various other elements of the painting. For instance, at the very bottom of the painting, the tips of the branches are represented by lines that lighten in color towards the ends, almost disappearing altogether. Moreover, some blossoms have been represented with a single dot of the brush rather than as a cluster of petals. Visual information is hence conveyed by varying brush pressure and brushstroke length rather than through modelling or shading.

Further **visual observations** on use of brush pressure

Sample Paragraph 2: close analysis of visual elements

Finally, Wu's use of the vivid red pigment uncommonly found in Chinese traditional ink to paint the flowers on the plum blossom tree suggests his influence from both Western and Chinese elements. The vividness of this red pigment is further amplified by the monochromatic ink washes spanning throughout the Wu's canvas, as the sole spark of colour in the painting can be traced to the painted red blossoms. The stylistic choice to paint the flowers in bright red pigment reveals certain contextual features of this painting: suggesting that bright, saturated colours were deliberately employed in accordance to the preference of an emerging urban class who were becoming the new art patrons of rapidly modernizing Shanghai.

Topic sentence: **visual observation** of use of red pigment, and **interpretation** using larger artistic influences

Further **observations** of materials used in details of painting

Interpretation of red pigment use, *in relation to artwork's context*: the socio-economic backgrounds of art patrons

Assignment Type: Comparative Prompt

This prompt requires students to compare two posters designed for Mitsukoshi Department Store in Japan – Hashiguchi Goyo’s *Kimono Beauty* (1911), and Suguira Hisui’s *Mitsukoshi Gofukuten Haru no Shin Chinretsukai (Spring Collection at Mitsukoshi)* (1914). Taking into consideration the nature of the artworks in question as advertisement material, students were required to discuss the artists’ attitudes towards their subject matter, and how they each created a particular image for the department store.

Assignment Goals: Structured visual description, with an intentional comparative strategy that supports a clear thesis statement.

Sample Paragraph 3: Introduction and Thesis

Goyo produced his poster at a time where shopping in a department store was a relatively new concept and drew upon the familiar image of the *bijin* to appeal to a larger audience. Hisui on the other hand, produced his poster a few years later where viewers were already familiar with this association between the *bijin* and the department store. While both grounded themselves firmly in the traditional Japanese image of beauty, each artists’ usage of it reflects the different historical contexts during which they had to appeal to viewers. This essay argues that the image of beauty that Goyo portrays is more assertive and direct in its viewer engagement, presenting the *bijin* as one who invites the viewer to participate in the lifestyle advocated by the Mitsukoshi department store. The image of beauty that Hisui presents on the other hand has far less direct engagement with its viewers; instead he portrays the *bijin* as an integral part of the lifestyle that Mitsukoshi wanted to sell to viewers.

Relevant contextual information about poster production, and the relationship between department stores (which commissioned these posters), and the poster’s intended audience.

Comparative thesis statement that addresses how the figure of the *bijin* is used differently by Goyo and Hisui

Sample Paragraphs 4: Comparative Argument through Visual Analysis

This distinction between *bijin* as guide and *bijin* as product is clearly seen in the differences between their physical postures. In Goyo's poster, the subject is seated upright with her neck slanted to the right while her head is turned slightly to the left. Coupled with the opposite diagonal created by her right arm, a curvature is formed that draws the eye from her hand along the contours of the subject's form all the way to her eyes that make direct contact with the viewer. This image of the *bijin* is an assertive one, directly addressing the viewer and inviting them in to engage with poster. The magazine is also opened toward the viewer, adding to the invitational tone of the poster.

The *bijin* in Hisui's poster is also portrayed in a seated position, but she leans toward the right instead of sitting upright. Her eyes glance toward the right as well, refusing to directly engage the viewer and leaving him or her unsure of whether she is observing the bouquet of flowers on the table, or whether she is looking at something beyond the frame of the poster. This draws attention away from the woman herself, making her less the focal point of the scene depicted and more just a part of the larger poster. The non-centrality of the *bijin* in Hisui's poster and lack of direct viewer engagement characterises the beauty not as someone who is inviting the reader to partake in a particular lifestyle, but who is part of its general aesthetic available for consumption.

Topic sentence

Visual observations of subject, in this case the *bijin*'s posture and eye line in Goyo's work

Interpreting effects on viewer engagement with poster

Visual observations of *bijin*'s posture and eye line in Hisui's work

Interpreting effects of eye line on viewer engagement with poster

Interpreting effects of Hisui's work *in relation to poster's purpose as advertisement material*, in comparison to the different effect that the *bijin* creates in Goyo's work