

**Excerpts from *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, Sylvan Barnet, 6<sup>th</sup> edition  
Chapter Two: Analysis**

**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* (Fig. 1) 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?)
- 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? How does her backhand contribute? What does her serve do to her opponents? The relevance of such questions is clear. Similarly, it makes 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 (Fig. 2). 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 (Fig. 3).

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 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*.

The study of artistic images and the cultural thoughts and attitudes that they reflect is called iconology. 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 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.)

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 Miro about what Eluard took to be a solar symbol in one of Miro's paintings. After a decent interval Miro 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 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.

For obvious examples, compare a work by an Action painter of the late 1940s and the 1950s such as Jackson Pollock (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 socio-historic content, and (if known) perhaps the artist's intentions. We also have to recognize that our own socio-historic 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 says that because the perceiver's eye "is regulated by need and prejudice" the eye "does not so much mirror as take and make." And in our discussion of Paul Taylor's assertion that works of art do not have meanings, we encountered an extreme version of this position, the claim that all interpretations--all discussions of content--are misinterpretations. One also hears 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 the basic things to look for in trying to acquire an understanding of the languages of art--that 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.

**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 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?

**In what condition has the work survived?** Is it exactly as it left the artist's hands, or has it been damaged, repaired, or in some way altered? What evidence of change can be seen?

**What is the title? Does it help to illuminate the work?** 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 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 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). In Mary Cassatt's *Woman in Black at the Opera* (c. 1878; also called *At the Francais, a Sketch*, illustrated on the cover of the present book), however, there is not so simple a dichotomy. 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, but the person who is looking at the picture--yet another, the viewer--surely sees power as located in the woman rather than in the man.

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 revealed not only the face but also the inner character of the figure. The face was said to be the index of the mind; thus, for instance, 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, 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: Does the image present a strong sense of a social class (as is usual in portraits by Frans Hals) or a strong 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 1940x, "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.

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 relationships between the shapes and the textures of the objects? 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 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?

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, or 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.)

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 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. If you must work from reproductions, try to find a book that includes details (small parts of the picture), preferably enlarged.

Is the color (if any) imitative of appearances, or expressive, or both? (Why is the flesh of the Buddha gold? Why did Picasso use white, grays, and blacks for *Guernica*, when in fact the Spaniards 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, Velazquez'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 non-divine 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-Bergere*, 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 creme 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 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 highlights?

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--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. Is the composition symmetrical (and perhaps therefore monumental, or quiet, or rigid and oppressive)? Is it diagonally recessive (and perhaps therefore dramatic or even melodramatic)?

Are figures harmoniously related, perhaps by a similar stance or shared action, 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 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 Velazquez'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.
- *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.

## **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 Chefred* (also called Khafre; Egyptian, third millennium BC) suggest about the man (Fig. 4)? What is the relationship of naturalism to idealism or abstraction? 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 Chefred 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 may be relevant. Consider especially whether the work presents a strong sense of an individual or, on the other 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 facade 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 Chefredren have the same effect if it were in clay instead of in highly polished diorite? Can one imagine Daniel Chester French's marble statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln Memorial, done in stainless steel? What are the associations of the material? For instance, early in this century welded iron suggested heavy industry, in contrast with bronze and marble, which suggested nobility, the classical world, and great wealth.

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 Mary*, 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*, 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 Chefredren* with Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* (Fig. 5). *King Chefredren* was carved; the sculptor, so to speak, cut away from the block everything that did not look like Chefredren. *Mercury* was modeled--built up--in clay or wax, and then cast in bronze. The massiveness or stability of *King Chefredren* 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 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 Chefredren*, 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 of the whiteness of George Segal's plaster casts (Fig. 6) 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 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* 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.

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?

How close do you want to get? Why?

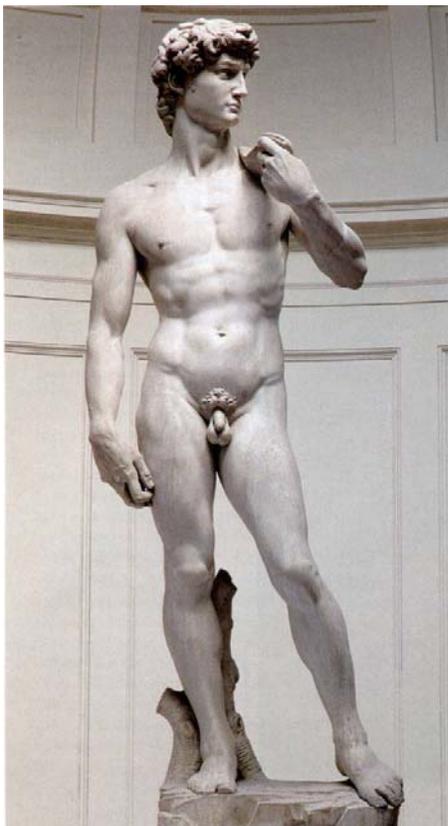


Fig. 1 Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-04, Marble, 13'3" high

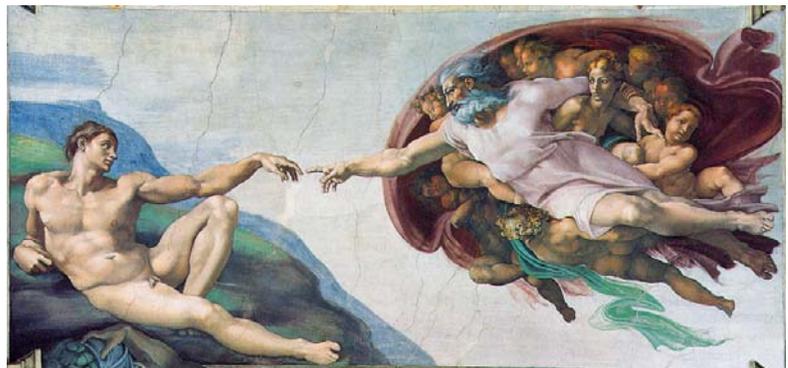


Fig. 2 Michelangelo, *Creation of Adam*, 1508-12, Fresco, 18'8" wide

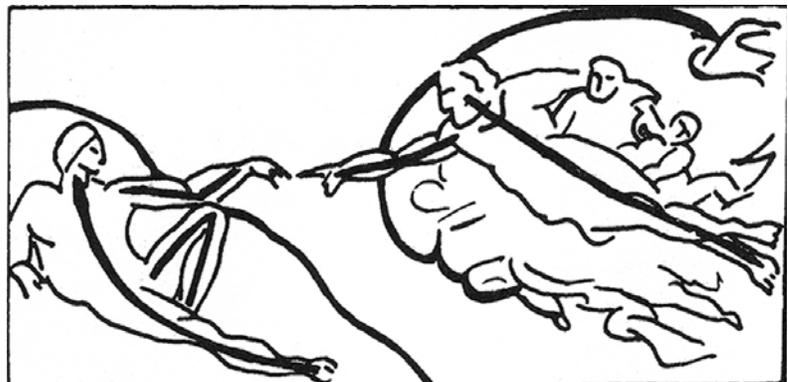


Fig. 3 Rudolf Arnheim, diagram of Michelangelo's *Creation*

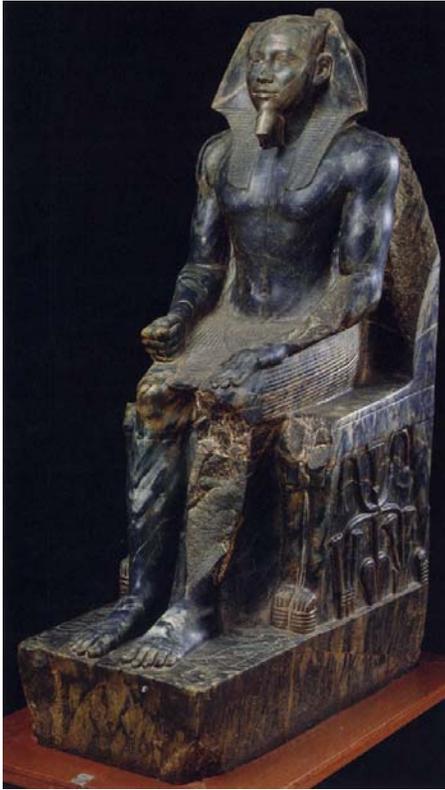


Fig. 4 *King Chephren*, c. 2500 BC, Diorite, 5'6" high



Fig. 5 Giovanni da Bologna, *Mercury*, 1580, Bronze, 69" high



Fig. 6 George Segal, *The Diner*, 1964-66, Mixed media, 94" high