

Writing About Art

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APPENDIX III: Sample student papers (stylistic analysis)

The CCNY students who wrote these papers were given variations of the assignment below, with the exhibition or area of the Metropolitan Museum from which they could select their objects specified. These papers did not necessarily receive an A, but they showed basically strong organization and mentioned important visual qualities.

Although I have edited them lightly for this book, what appears here is, in all important ways, the same as what the students gave me. These sample papers should be read critically in the same way that the visual descriptions were in the previous section.

Underline the topic sentences and see if their sequence of topics seems logical. Look at each paragraph and see if it develops the idea introduced by the topic sentence. Look at the first paragraph with special care. This is where the reader should learn what the paper will be about, and what specific issues will be addressed. Does the paper do what it promises? Is enough visual information given for the reader to be able to follow the analysis? Find reproductions of the works. Does the paper discuss the relevant things that you see in them?

The Assignment:

Go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Select THREE WORKS and identify them using the information that appears on the object label, including the museum number. In 2-3 double-spaced pages (maximum 1000 words), explain the most important ways in which the works you have chosen look alike. What visual qualities do they share? Think about how the subjects have been defined and represented, the handling of the materials, and the formats and sizes of the works. There will be other qualities you'll need to consider, depending on what you select. Look carefully at what you have chosen and then create your own definition of their style, based ONLY on what you see – not what you have read about them. NO RESEARCH. Be sure to give enough details so that the reader will be able to visualize the works in all important aspects.

Sample Student Stylistic Analysis #1

Three oil paintings by Claude Monet, all in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, share important visual characteristics that define his artistic style. "Camille Monet on a Garden Bench" (2002.62.1) shows a woman, who looks out at the viewer of the picture, sitting on a bench in a garden. A top-hatted man leans over the bench and, farther back in the scene, another woman stands next to a bed of red flowers. "Camille Monet in the Garden at Argenteuil" (2000.93.1) shows a woman walking on a garden path. She appears at the left of the picture, next to a tree. Flowers in a large garden to the right and a house behind them fill most of the composition. "La Grenouillère" (29.100.112) depicts a scene on a river with boats in the foreground, and an island with one tree and a number of people on it in the middle of the composition. An open building filled with people projects into the picture on the right, and people are bathing on the left. A row of trees on the other bank fills the background. All three paintings are about two and a half feet high and three and a half feet wide. The size is important because it helps to determine where the viewer should stand to best see the work.

The distance from which these works are viewed has a strong impact on what is seen. In all the pictures, the paint is applied to the canvas in strong, thick brushstrokes, as well as in dabs of color and shaky lines. The woman's dress in "Garden Bench" is made of layers of shapes, accented by black lines that seem to be nothing when seen up close, but eloquently convey the fabric when viewed from far away. The flowers that make up the center of the composition in "Garden at Argenteuil" look like random splatters of paint when viewed from a foot away. From a distance, they become an organized floral arrangement in vibrant, buzzing colors that look as if they are about to rustle in the breeze. The water in "La Grenouillère" looks like nothing more than squiggly lines until the viewer takes a few steps back to recognize gorgeous, inviting ripples in the water reflecting afternoon light.

Another common element in these pictures is the use of color. Monet has chosen cool, subdued colors for the centers of the compositions, while the backgrounds are bathed in warm light. The woman and man in the foreground of "Garden Bench" are under the shade of a tree, cast in a greenish hue, while the woman and flowers behind them are glowing like the over-exposed part of a photograph taken in low light. The

woman and flowers in the foreground of “Garden at Argenteuil” are shown in shade as well, while the house behind them beams pink and orange, reflecting the bright light. The shade in the foreground of “La Grenouillère” makes the water seem almost too cold to swim in, but the trees in the distance show the light of a summer afternoon.

These works also describe similar subjects. All three show leisurely moments in the lives of people who seem to be relatively wealthy. Both the men and the women appear to be well dressed. The gardens contain flowers, not food, and they are well-maintained. The outdoor pleasure spot at La Grenouillère is for people to enjoy themselves. No one is shown working. The weather is sunny and pleasant. These scenes give modern viewers a positive feeling, as if they are welcome to join in the relaxation.

Sample Student Stylistic Analysis #2

Pierre Bonnard's oil paintings *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden (The Breakfast Room)* (1930-31, The Museum of Modern Art), *Dining Room on the Garden* (1934-35, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), and *Table in Front of the Window* (1934-35, private collection) display several visual qualities that define a recognizable style. These similarities can be seen in the works' subject matter, composition, texture, color, and stylization.

All three works show the same subject matter. *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden* depicts a tabletop covered with various objects, including a book, tableware, and fruit, in front of a large window that frames a garden landscape. To the left of the window is a woman, cut in half by the edge of the picture. Outside is a balustrade and, beyond it, a path surrounded by dense vegetation. *Dining Room on the Garden* also shows a tabletop in front of a wall with a window. This tabletop contains two bowls of fruit, a vase with flowers, a pitcher, a mug, and two books, among other objects. Behind the table are two chairs. To the right of the window is a standing woman. Through the window, a strip of water is visible between the sky and a garden path that is flanked by trees on either side. Like the other two paintings, *Table in Front of the Window* also depicts a tabletop in the foreground and a wall containing a large window behind it. The window frames a landscape composed of an area with vegetation sandwiched between a path and the sky. The tabletop contains a bowl of fruit, a book, and other tableware. The top of a wooden chair is visible directly behind the table. The arm and head of a human figure emerge from the right border of the painting.

The arrangement of the subject matter in the composition is also very similar. Each one depicts an interior space with a human figure and a table in front of a window that frames a landscape. In the foreground, a combination of books, fruit, and tableware is dispersed around the tabletop, which fills the lower portion of the work. The viewer of the picture looks down on the table. Behind the tabletop, a large window occupies most of the remaining space. The window is divided into one or two sections by its frame, and it is shown between curtains or the walls of the room. The figure at the side of the window is only partly visible, cut by the edge of the picture, cast in shadow, or blended into the wall. In the background, a landscape with trees and a path can be seen through the window.

There is a strong emphasis on the vertical in each of the compositions. In *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden*, the tabletop is patterned with blue and white vertical stripes. Two vertical strips, which divide the window, are parallel to the woman. The balustrade in the garden has repeated upright columns. Behind the fence, a winding path leads upwards toward the horizon. In *Dining Room on the Garden*, the woman stands parallel to a vertically oriented window frame. The chairs behind the table contain vertical elements as well. There is a darkened, vertical stripe on the left side of the wall. Almost all of the objects on the table, especially the pitcher, mug, vase with flowers, and bowls of fruit, open upwards. In *Table in Front of the Window*, the tabletop is patterned with white and red vertical stripes. The book and bowl of fruit on the table, as well as the three supports of the chair behind the table, guide the viewer's eye upward along the vertical window frame.

A seemingly chaotic use of texture and color typify the paintings. The brushstrokes are clearly visible and appear to come from many different directions. The paint is applied quite heavily so that globs project from the canvas. This creates the impression of a rough and splotchy surface. Furthermore, the colors are never completely mixed. For example, in *Table in Front of the Window*, the bowl of fruit appears to be white from afar. When examined up close, however, it turns out to have various streaks of differing hues, including red, purple and black. Therefore, the colors look saturated and vibrant when viewed from a distance, but appear muted in close proximity. This creates the illusion that the work is pulsating.

The highly stylized forms in Bonnard's paintings are characterized by warped shapes and indistinct attributes. The shape of each element in the paintings is slightly askew

from what it might look like in real life. For example, the bowls and plates are not perfectly rounded. Instead, the edges constantly waver. Similarly, the window frame, which one would assume is completely erect, curves slightly. These warped forms are further distorted by the blurring of their features. This can be seen most obviously in the garden landscapes. The vegetation is composed of masses of variously colored blobs, which are only recognizable as branches or bushes by their context within the work.

Bonnard uses obstructed forms to play with the viewer's sense of space. In each work, the lower border of the picture cuts off the tabletop, and the upper border cuts off the window. Only a small sliver of the wall can be seen on either side of the window. This makes it impossible for the viewer to know the exact size of the table and window, or of the room that contains them. Only a portion of the garden landscape is visible through the window. The vertical framing in the windows further disrupts this view. The human figure in each of the works is also obstructed. In *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden*, the left border cuts off half of the woman's body. The woman in *Dining Room on the Garden* is hidden behind the tabletop and a vase with flowers. In *Table in Front of the Window*, only a portion of the figure's head and arm is visible. These obstructed forms give an air of mystery to Bonnard's paintings and leave the viewer wanting more.

Sample Student Stylistic Analysis #3

1. Wang Hui, *Water Village After Zhao Danian*, 1662, Palace Museum, Beijing
2. Wang Hui, *Reading Next to the Window in the Mountains*, 1666, Palace Museum, Beijing
3. Wang Hui, *Autumn Forests at Yushan*, 1668, Palace Museum, Beijing

These three works of art, distinctly different from each other upon first glance, share many stylistic features that distinguish them as landscape paintings by a single artist – Wang Hui. *Reading Next to the Window in the Mountains* depicts a grand mountain range, painted on a one foot by five foot, vertically-oriented hanging scroll. What caught my attention was the spatial composition, the way in which a long sequence of mountains fits on such a narrow picture. They run the entire length of the paper, weaving left to right as they work their way upwards to the highest peak. Not only is there an illusion of recession in space, but an illusion of rising in space is worked in as well. You can see that the peaks higher up on the composition are farther away, as well

as physically taller. This spatial organization is repeated in both *Autumn Forests*, which has a very similar set of mountains, and *Water Village*, with its gently rolling hills winding up to a modest peak.

This double-effect of space is made possible by a visual backbone found in all three works. Wang Hui creates a pattern of repetition with mountains and hills that looks like the backbone of an animal. Especially in *Reading* and *Autumn Forests*, rocks and peaks overlap each other, with each one slightly higher than the last, acting as vertebrae in the mountain chain. To distinguish the individual geological forms from one another, the painter uses gradients of grays and colors to highlight the edges. The result is a light and dark banded pattern which gives the forms dimension, and directs your eye along the backbone, and up the painting.

The scale of these mountains is also a stylistic signature of Wang Hui. Civilization is evident in all three works, but it is represented as insignificant, almost an afterthought. The rooftops, boats, and people which appear in the pictures are miniscule – each subject taking up no more than one square inch, and completely swallowed by the surrounding landscape. The sweeping shapes of nature are the focus of the compositions.

Wang Hui depicts these scenes using ink in a consistent manner. Although the materials are different, with only black ink in *Reading* and a very limited color palette – mostly light green, light orange, and gray – in *Water Village* and *Autumn Forest*, the technique is the same. He uses very light washes to fill in the rocks and formations after he has established their edges with slightly darker lines. The washes of green and orange often fade into each other, and his gray washes are gradated with white.

On top of these washes are complex and meticulously rendered details painted with dark ink and a very fine brush. For example, it seems as if every leaf and ripple of bark is shown on the trees. *Autumn Forest* features about a dozen trees in the foreground, with each individual branch and leaf drawn and overlapping, creating a dense mesh of lines. *Reading* features three large trees which take up the bottom quarter of the composition. Again, the branches are so finely detailed that, seen from afar, the trees become a dark sprawling mass. The trees in *Water Village* are on a much smaller scale, but fine details can be seen on them as well. The impressive trees are not the only showcases of fine details. Countless tiny dabs of paint, no more than one-quarter inch long, create varying textures. *Reading* is a study in density, with seemingly millions of

tiny touches of paint forming shrubbery, depicting tiny trees in the distance, and providing a rough texture to the rocks. The amount of detail in grayscale makes the mountains seem solid and impenetrable. *Autumn Forest* is not nearly as dense, though the dabs are still plentiful. Refreshingly, *Water Village* offers a reprieve from the frenetic paint strokes, as a mostly blank river takes up much of the composition. Here, lines are longer, finer, and swirl around each other to describe waves and currents.

This contrast between *Water Village* and the other two paintings is what interested me the most. Though all three have nearly identical meandering compositions, *Water Village* looks like a photographic negative. Instead of a dominating mountain chain, dense with color and details, the backbone of this painting is a river created by the negative space of the paper. Its winding form is determined by the shapes of the gentle hills that frame the riverbanks. The exact opposite is true of the other two, where the negative space is used to depict mist that further defines the shape of the mountains.

Even though *Reading*, *Autumn Forest*, and *Water Village* are different in terms of color, density, and use of negative space, these differences do not overwhelm the stylistic similarities. The ink is always light, the palette is limited, and the attention to detail remains consistent. Combine this with the shared grand representation of nature and similar spatial organizations, and it is very clear that these three paintings are stylistic kin.

Sample Student Stylistic Analysis #4

Three medieval sculptures representing heads, found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, show the same stylistic qualities. *Head of a David* (38.180) is a life-size limestone head from Paris, made in about 1150. *Head of Joseph* (2007.143) is slightly smaller than life-size, made of limestone with traces of paint, and comes from Chartres Cathedral in France, ca. 1230. *Head of a King* (47.100.55) is twice life-size, and made in the vicinity of Paris about 1230. In their symmetry, idealization, carved lines, and use of shadow, the works seem very similar.

The most obvious common characteristic is the symmetrical arrangement of the features, which idealize the figures by suggesting perfection. All three heads are shown in a frontal pose, looking straight ahead. David's hair, which shows under his low, cylindrical crown, and his beard are arranged in bilateral symmetry. The symmetry in Joseph's head is emphasized by deep eye sockets that create triangular shadows which

are identical on both sides of his face, cast by the eyebrows towards his nose. His beard is split to two, creating a long central axis. The King's head also shows symmetry in his crown, and his long, falling, curly hair. Two curls on his forehead and his long mustache fit into the same organization.

The smooth surface of the faces also idealizes the heads. David's cheeks are smooth until they gradually become a surface with another texture which is his beard. Joseph's skin stretches smoothly across his high, pronounced cheek bones. The areas under his eyes, between his eyebrows, and between his mouth and nose, are without wrinkles or marks. The King's face is deteriorated in many parts, but some smooth areas on his cheeks suggest that it once resembled the others.

Although the three heads are idealized, they do not represent ageless figures. David has an expressive fold of skin that extends from the base of the nose to the sides of the mouth. Joseph has a very pronounced and developed bone structure, which is definitely that of a mature adult. Several superficial grooves on his forehead represent wrinkles. The King's head also indicates age by very shallow grooves on the forehead.

Similar curvilinear lines are used to describe the hair and beards of the three heads. Seen from the side, David's hair consists of equally spaced, continuous, shallow grooves. The beard is represented in a similar fashion, but with narrower and shallower channels than the ones of the hair. Joseph's hair has wide and shallow grooves contrasted to narrower, but deeper ones on his beard. The King's hair has both wider and deeper grooves than those in his beard.

The shadows cast by the deeply carved forms create dramatic visual effects. The decorative cuts in David's crown are pairs of equally-spaced, slender, vertical, round-edged rectangles. These are deep dark spaces that draw the eye to the top of the head, and create a rhythmical movement around it. Curls in the first row of the beard are placed in measured increments, each bordered by deep cavities that create a shadow. These, too, create a rhythm that is parallel to the line of the jaw bone. On Joseph's face, the shadows cast by the eyebrows form diagonals towards the sides of the nose. A soft shadow created by the cheek-bones repeats the diagonal movement downwards. Finally, the King's face is visually framed by shadows that arrest the viewer. Deep spaces between the sides of the face and the long hair create two strong, vertical, dark areas. A horizontal shadow is cast by the curls above the forehead. Another dark horizontal is cast by the upper lip, continued in a deeply carved, concave area the mustache. The result is

that our eye is drawn to the face, moving and bouncing within this visual frame of verticals and horizontals.

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