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Writing About Art

By Marjorie Munsterberg

Preface

I created *Writing About Art* as the text for a course of the same name at The City College of New York. The book explains the different approaches college students encounter in undergraduate art history classes. Each chapter outlines the characteristics of one type of visual or historical analysis, and briefly explains its history and development. Passages by well-known art historians provide examples of each method. Four appendices outline the steps in researching art historical topics, writing essays about them, and citing sources properly. Appendices III and IV include sample student papers, accompanied by my comments and suggested changes.

I have not included illustrations, in the hope that more attention will be given to the passages quoted. Glancing at a picture and then skimming text about it is not the same as trying to create a mental image from words alone. The absence of illustrations also makes it easier for each reader to decide which words are especially effective in communicating information about visual things. However, complete identification of the images discussed is given so that the reader can find them easily on the Web. Many of them will be familiar from art history surveys.

Writing About Art has been revised repeatedly in response to comments from students and colleagues. It is no exaggeration to say that without the help of my students at CCNY, I never could have – or would have – written this text. I owe them all, especially those who allowed me to use their papers as examples, tremendous thanks. They also have forced me into the twenty-first century, making it clear how useful it would be to have this text available as a website as well as in a paperback and a Kindle edition. In appreciation of all they have given me, I dedicate this work to my students in Art 210.

Marjorie Munsterberg

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<p>The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description. The first thing is to recognise how extraordinarily difficult this is. It is no mere matter of carefulness; you have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise — that which is common to you, me and everybody. But each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language . . . [which] has its own special nature, its own conventions and communal ideas. It is only by a concentrated effort of the mind that you can hold it fixed to your own purpose.¹</p>	<p>The way to breathe life into the description of any object is to apply adjectives to it. A piece of cloth is of little interest for us until we know whether it is starched, handwoven, salmon pink, translucent, knotted, torn, bespangled, or sodden.²</p>
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Professor Marjorie Munsterberg received her Ph.D. from Columbia University, where she wrote her dissertation about the British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner. Since then, she has published articles and book reviews about 19th-century British and French art, as well as co-authored *World Ceramics* (Penguin/Studio Vista, 1998). She currently is writing a monograph about the development of art criticism in Britain during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

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Introduction

This text is intended to help students improve their ability to write about visual things. I explain the most common types of analysis used by art historians and a little bit about how these methods developed. This is not a history of art history, however, nor is it an introduction to the theory and methods of art history. Major scholars are not mentioned and complicated ideas have been presented only in terms relevant to their practical application. It also is not a guide to learning how to look at art. For that, Joshua Taylor's *Learning to Look* remains unsurpassed.³

Almost all of my examples come from texts written in English. Translations change exactly what is of greatest interest here: the words and concepts used by good writers about art. Furthermore, there is a history to the language used in English by art historians. Sometimes this has shaped the meaning of a term, occasionally in significant ways. A few examples will be discussed below. Even in their use of ordinary words, however, these writers can serve as models. Their vocabulary and ideas offer a wealth of contributions to the internal resources upon which we all draw when we write. The more developed these resources are, the more fluent and expressive writing based upon them will be.

Painting, sculpture, and architecture have been considered the major forms of the fine arts during much of the Western tradition. They have attracted many of the most ambitious artists and, consequently, more attention from art historians. Architecture, however, like video and electronic mediums, requires a specialized descriptive and analytical vocabulary. Just as the art historical methods I explain are the ones most commonly used, so the forms of art discussed in the passages I have selected are those most frequently covered in art history courses. For the same reason, most of the art analyzed in the text comes from the West.

I have not included any reproductions, in the hope that more attention will be given to the passages quoted. Glancing at a picture and then skimming text about it is not the same as trying to create a mental image of something from words alone. The absence of

illustrations also should make it easier for each reader to decide which words seem particularly effective in communicating information about visual things. However, I have given enough information about each work so that a picture of it can be found without difficulty. Many of them will be familiar from art history surveys.

Another editorial decision I made was to cite the names of the authors quoted within my text. The normal practice of putting that information in the notes makes it easier for the reader, who is given a smoothly flowing argument instead of one constantly interrupted by names and book titles. Here, however, since my subject is writing, identifying the writer with the passage seemed useful. The most important art historians of the past have birth and death dates in parentheses after the first mention of their names.

This is a guide to writing about art, not to writing itself. It is no substitute for a book like *The Elements of Style*, the classic but still inspiring text by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White.⁴ Nonetheless, I would like to begin with a few fundamental principles. Paragraphs should be the basic organizing unit of any essay. Each one should develop a single idea, introduced at the beginning of the paragraph by a topic sentence. The paragraphs should be organized so that the ideas follow one another in a logical sequence. This means that the topic sentences should form an outline of what the writer intends to express. Sentences should be complete, and grammar and spelling must be correct. Words should convey the writer's meaning as directly as possible.

The choice of which verb tenses to use must be consistent throughout a single piece of writing. My personal choice is to use the present tense for anything that still exists, like a work of art or a book, and the past tense for a completed action. In other words, Michelangelo sculpted *David* (because he did it centuries ago), but *David* shows Michelangelo's interest in the Classical conception of the nude male body (because it still does). This seems to me the most logical approach, although sometimes it leads to awkward phrasing. Many people use the present tense for both cases. In other words, Michelangelo uses the Classical conception of the nude male body in his sculpture *David*. Whatever the choice, it must be adhered to throughout any particular essay.

To be effective, a paper must be directed toward a single goal. The purpose matters to the writer and it matters to the reader, who will have expectations about what comes next based on what has been promised. Writing intended to evoke a vivid impression of a work of art has to present very different information from an interpretation of the

subject that depends upon detailed historical arguments. For this reason, it is important to let the reader know as soon as possible what kind of analysis will follow. Every aspect of the paper should contribute to it.

Success is measured by how well the intended meaning has been communicated to the intended reader. There is no substitute for having someone read a draft, or for putting a paper aside and returning to revise it later. Even before that, though, a writer should try to assess the clarity and logic of the presentation. Underlining topic sentences to see if they really do outline the argument is helpful. Quickly sketching elements mentioned in a visual description is another revealing exercise. If there is no place in the drawing for a particular detail, it has been introduced at the wrong point in the essay or essential elements have been neglected. Most of all, the writer should be prepared to revise and revise and revise. Good papers never just happen.

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Visual Description

The simplest visual description uses ordinary words to convey what the writer sees. First he or she must look at the subject – slowly, carefully, and repeatedly, if possible – to identify the parts that make the whole. These parts must be sorted into the more and the less important, since no description can include everything, and assumptions must be separated from actual observations. It is easy to confuse what we see with what we think we see, or what we know is there. Then comes the difficult job of finding appropriate words. In effect, writing a visual description consists of two separate acts of translation. The first transforms a visual experience into a verbal one and the second turns a private experience into one that can be communicated to someone else.

Any writer takes some things for granted. It is crucial to understand what these things are and then consider them in terms of both the purpose of the description and the interests of the reader. For example, to describe the sky in a particular 17th-century Dutch landscape painting as cloudy indicates one aspect of the picture in a general way. It leaves entirely unexplained the specific elements that create the visual effect – like the shapes and colors of the clouds, the way they have been arranged, or how they suggest space. These qualities cannot be imagined by a reader who has not been given explicit details. In the same way, identifying something by artist, title, and date might be all a specialist needs to visualize the work. Anyone else, however, will need to be told much more.

Generally speaking, the best place to begin a visual description is with an explanation of the subject and the materials of the work. Together they provide enough information to orient any reader. In most cases, though, neither will be enough by itself. To say that a work of art shows a woman and a child, but not whether the representation is in two or three dimensions, makes it hard to form even the roughest mental image. If, however, the writer says that the work is a life-size sculpture of a woman and child, the reader can begin to imagine what it might look like. He or she also will know enough to have questions. A good written description will anticipate these questions and provide

information in an order that answers them.

Additional observations can make the first sentence even more useful. Perhaps the artist is famous, and “a life-size sculpture of a woman and child by Henry Moore” would convey a great deal to the reader. Perhaps the subject is the Virgin Mary and Jesus, an identification filled with meaning for someone who is knowledgeable about Christianity. Maybe the sculptor is not known and the subject has not been identified. Then describing the relationship between the figures might be helpful. To say that the work is a life-size sculpture of a seated woman holding a small child on her lap gives the reader a beginning. Of course the introductory sentence cannot hold too much information. It must strike a balance between giving the reader a few vague generalities and trying to convey everything at once.

A traditional work of art is, first of all, a physical object. The material or materials used may not be possible to identify by just looking. Perhaps they look like something they are not, or the surface and texture have been obscured by layers of paint. In cases like these, the correct identification can be brought to the attention of the reader, but not as part of what anyone can see. This is an instance of knowing being different from seeing. If information is based on an external source, even a museum label, the source must be cited after it has been verified. Many mistakes get repeated as facts by people who did not bother to check them.

The size of a work is always crucial. The effect made on a viewer by an object that can be held in the hand, compared to a billboard that covers the side of a building, is so different as to make any similarities seem almost inconsequential. The first demands a very intimate relationship, with careful and close looking to see what is there. The other must be seen from a distance and may contain details that are too small to be comprehensible. Scale also influences the design of a work, since the same composition, colors, and methods of making rarely transfer effectively from a small format to a very large one, or vice versa. This is another reason why size must be considered in a visual description.

Color matters. Even if it is not part of the subject, it influences the way we look at a work. Bright colors catch our eye before dark ones do, and even subtle changes may matter a great deal. The sense of space created within an abstract painting by Wassily Kandinsky comes from the colors he chose as much as the shapes. Often the color of a work has changed over time. Some Greek sculptures, which we are accustomed to see as

white marble, were painted with lifelike colors. Our expectations make reconstructions look startlingly incorrect.⁵ The controversy that surrounded the cleaning of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican was partly about technical matters, but also about the tremendous change it made to the colors. Those who accepted the results of the cleaning as historically correct had to revise their ideas about Michelangelo as an artist as well as about the history of 16th-century Italian art.⁶

The qualities listed above explain why a reproduction can never substitute for an original. A good copy will convey certain elements of the work, but it cannot convey them all. Even an excellent color photograph of an oil painting, a two-dimensional picture of a two-dimensional picture, will leave out more information than it gives. The same is even more true with reproductions of three-dimensional objects. A single image communicates only one point of view, and it cannot indicate size, shape, surface, or volume. These are the most essential visual qualities of sculpture.

Art historians usually do not write general visual descriptions, because they are intent upon making a specific argument or they are interested in a particular aspect of a work. One exception is James Cahill, whose analyses of Chinese paintings provide exceptionally complete accounts of what the pictures look like. Even without being interested in his scholarly purpose, any reader can appreciate his skill as a writer. Typically, he used ordinary words to make his readers understand size and brush stroke as well as subject and composition. His authorial voice is even and careful and always that of a historian, removed in time and place from the works in question. At the same time, however, he often described what he saw in terms of how it must have been made. In this way, he made a sense of artistic process seem like a vital part of the finished works.

One passage by Cahill about a picture from the Ming period shows how he helped make his readers more attentive viewers. About the ink paintings in an album by the painter Wang Li (Private collection and Shanghai Museum, China), he wrote:

The surviving leaves [of *Scenes of Hua-shan*] exhibit a remarkable variety in theme and composition . . . [O]ne may question whether the actual landscape offers any such powerfully overhanging formations of strangely twisted and pitted rock as the album does.

In one of the leaves, such a mass occupies almost the whole space of the picture,

leaving only narrow ravines at the sides, in which travelers are visible on paths, climbing always upward. . . . He draws in heavy lines that taper at the ends and thicken where they bend; it is the interrelationships of these bent lines, together with sparse texture strokes and a limited use of ink wash, that define the shapes of the rocks and the hollows in and around them. Bushes and trees grow from crevices or on the tops of boulders and ridges. Presenting such a massive escarpment full face to the viewer . . . seems to endow the landscape with an unearthly inner life more than it portrays the effects of natural geological processes.⁷

These few sentences suggest the landscape elements in the picture, the way they are arranged, what kinds of strokes Wang Li used, and the effect of the work on the viewer.

Beginning with a description of the subject of the album as “powerfully overhanging formations of strangely twisted and pitted rock” gives the reader a vivid image to which each word has contributed. “Powerfully” suggests the way in which the rocks are “overhanging” and “formations” suggests the idea of shapes being created over time. This makes better sense after the next phrase, which describes the rocks as “strangely twisted and pitted.” All of those words allow “mass,” in the next sentence, to suggest a specific visual character. Similarly, “heavy lines that taper at the ends and thicken where they bend” is made up of words that occur in everyday language, but they combine to evoke how Wang Li’s brush must have moved to deposit the ink as it did. With the phrase “massive escarpment,” the final sentence reiterates the ideas of powerful formations and mass. Then it turns in the unexpected direction of the painted landscape having “an unearthly inner life,” which suggests an entirely different dimension from the last phrase, “the effects of natural geological processes.” Together, though, they convey a sense of wonder at how the picture presents its subject.

A Western oil painting offers very different qualities to describe from a Chinese ink painting. An exhibition review about Willem de Kooning’s work by David Rosand conveys how dramatic the effect of paint and color can be:

Among the first colors to emerge from de Kooning’s monochrome palette of the late 1930s is a flesh pink. Modulated from near neutrality to cosmetic blowsiness, this hue never abandons its significance: throughout his work, it declares flesh. As de Kooning’s paint itself acquires an increased substance, which in turn inspires and provokes the aggressiveness of the brush, his visceral equation of impasto and flesh

becomes more integral to his art. This phenomenology of paint is most obviously realized in the *Woman* series (from c. 1950 onwards). . . . The series marks a watershed in his career: the return to figuration allowed the artist to acknowledge overtly the physiognomic basis of his painterly style, its source in the gestures of the body. . . . Even as de Kooning moved to an imagery of abstract landscapes, individual strokes, gestures developed in the earlier figures, continue to carry by allusion and recollection their sense of flesh – just as the recurring pink proclaims flesh. . . .⁸

Like Cahill, Rosand saw the physical movements of the painter in the work he described, but they are “gestures of the body” rather than the hand. These gestures provide the “physiognomic basis” for de Kooning’s style, and create a direct connection between the figural subject and the presence of the artist. Color also is important, the crucial “flesh pink” changing from “near neutrality” to “cosmetic blowsiness.”

Rosand used the word “impasto” to refer to de Kooning’s paint. The term, which comes from the Italian word for dough, refers to accumulations of paint on the surface of a canvas, often textured so they catch the light. The technique first appeared in Venetian paintings made during the Renaissance, by Titian among others. Rembrandt van Rijn and Vincent Van Gogh are two other artists famous for manipulating oil paint in this way. By choosing this word, as well as describing the style as “painterly” (discussed in *Stylistic Analysis*), Rosand connected de Kooning to a specific tradition of Western painting.

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Ekphrasis

One particular kind of visual description is also the oldest type of writing about art in the West. Called ekphrasis, it was created by the Greeks. The goal of this literary form is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. In many cases, however, the subject never actually existed, making the ekphrastic description a demonstration of both the creative imagination and the skill of the writer. For most readers of famous Greek and Latin texts, it did not matter whether the subject was actual or imagined. The texts were studied to form habits of thinking and writing, not as art historical evidence.⁹

Homer's description of Achilles' shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad* stands at the beginning of the ekphrastic tradition. Two things about it became central to the genre. First, the passage implicitly compares visual and verbal means of description, most dramatically by weaving elements that could not be part of a shield (like movement and sound) with things that could be (like physical material and visual details). This emphasizes the possibilities of the verbal and the limitations of the visual. Second, the thing being described comes to seem real in the imagination of the reader, despite the fact that it could not exist.

Many writers in subsequent centuries followed Homer's lead and wrote ekphrastic descriptions. During the Italian Renaissance, the rhetorical form became an important literary genre and, in a surprising twist, artists made visual works based on written descriptions of art that had never existed.¹⁰ A famous 19th-century example of ekphrastic poetry is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," written in 1819. Like Homer, Keats mixed descriptions of things that could have been visible on a Greek vase with things that could not have been. Unlike Homer, Keats made himself and his own experience of viewing the vase an important part of the poem. This shift in emphasis reflects a transformation in the genre of ekphrasis, which increasingly came to include the reaction of a particular viewer as part of the description of an object.¹¹

In the second half of the 18th century, ekphrastic writing suddenly appeared in a

new context. Travelers and would-be travelers provided a growing public eager for vivid descriptions of works of art. Without any way of publishing accurate reproductions, appearances had to be conveyed through words alone. William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater, to name three great 19th-century writers in English, published grand set-pieces of ekphrasis about older as well as contemporary art. For them, the fact that the object existed mattered a great deal. The goal of these Victorian writers was to make the reader feel like a participant in the visual experience. The more convincingly this was done, the more effective the writing was judged to be.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was the most influential Victorian writer about art, famous for his impassioned defense of the painter J.M.W. Turner and his brilliant ekphrastic passages. In one of them, published in *Modern Painters* in 1843, he described Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On*, also known as *The Slave Ship* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Like Homer and Keats, Ruskin mixed specific visual details of the picture with allusions to movement and sound in his description of what the painting looked like. Unlike them, his goal was to persuade readers to believe in his imaginative understanding of an actual work of art.

It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. The whole surface of the sea included in the picture is divided into two ridges of enormous swell, not high, nor local, but a low, broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep-drawn breath after the torture of the storm. Between these two ridges, the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendour which burns like gold and bathes like blood. Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illumined foam. They do not rise everywhere, but three or four together in wild groups, fitfully and furiously, as the under strength of the swell compels or permits them; leaving between them treacherous spaces of level and whirling water, now lighted with green and lamp-like fire, now flashing back the gold of the declining sun, now fearfully dyed from above with the indistinguishable images of the burning clouds, which fall upon them in flakes of crimson and scarlet,

and give to the reckless waves the added motion of their own fiery flying. Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty* ship as it labors amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, – and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.

[Ruskin's note]*She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses.¹²

Ruskin's description is overwhelming. The weather, the light, the movement of the sea, the ship seen against the sky, are made vivid by his rich use of adjectives. Ruskin drew upon an immense vocabulary, using many words that are unfamiliar today. Even his Victorian contemporaries regarded his style of writing as exceptional. It shows the influence of the King James translation of the Bible and, in this particular passage, Shakespeare. These are references that Ruskin assumed his audience would understand, although any modern reader needs a dictionary and specialized knowledge to follow them.¹³

It is hard to imagine that anything important has been left out of Ruskin's description. A review of the painting when it was exhibited in London in 1840, however, written by the novelist William Thackeray, makes it clear how much Ruskin ignored:

The slaver throwing its cargo overboard is the most tremendous piece of colour that ever was seen; it sets the corner of the room in which it hangs into flame. . . . Rocks of gamboge are marked down upon the canvas; flakes of white laid on with a trowel; bladders of vermilion madly spirited here and there. Yonder is the slaver rocking in the midst of a flashing foam of white-lead. The sun glares down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple, into which chocolate-coloured slaves are plunged, and chains that will not sink; and round these are floundering such a race of fishes as never was seen since the saeculum Pyrrhae; gasping dolphins redder than the reddest herrings; horrid spreading polypi, like huge, slimy, poached eggs, in which hapless [black slaves] plunge and disappear. Ye gods, what a 'middle passage'!¹⁴

Thackeray's account is as vivid and detailed as Ruskin's, but sarcastic in the style of some

art criticism of the period. The excesses of the language are not only entertaining, but they convey something of what certainly appeared to many like the excesses of Turner's painting. "The sun glares down upon the horrible sea of emerald and purple," for example, suggests how extraordinary the colors seemed. "Flakes of white laid on with a trowel" combines information about color and surface with a sense of making. In fact, although Ruskin did not mention it, Turner's handling of paint and the colors he used are dramatic, remarkable aspects of the work. Mention of the "Middle Passage," a reference to the Atlantic slave trade, directly relates Turner's picture to a contentious political issue of the time. Ruskin, by contrast, only included a note with the information that the picture showed a slave ship. In these respects, Thackeray's review is more informative than Ruskin's, even if it lacks the extraordinary imaginative reach and literary ambition of the set-piece from *Modern Painters*.

Modern writers about art have neither the number of readers nor the amount of space that Ruskin and Thackeray could assume. Furthermore, the ability to reproduce works of art in sumptuous color plates has reduced the importance of ekphrastic writing. Coffee-table art books, however, have provided a new venue. The writer need not create an image of the work for the viewer because superb illustrations are the point of the publication. Nonetheless, the best writers use the text to guide the reader through the works being discussed and, in the process, they interpret them with their emphases and choice of words. A long passage by Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006) about J.A.D. Ingres's *Madame Moitessier* (National Gallery, London), for example, suggests the visual richness of Ingres's picture with the detail and complexity of the prose while leading us through the composition.

At first, the dense luxury of Second Empire costume and *décor* dazzles the eye, above all in the cornucopian outburst of printed roses that spills across the silk dress, and then in the compounding of this splendor through the tufted damask of the sofa, the amethyst bracelet, the glimpse of a fan and oriental vase on the Rococo console, the gilded ornament of the mirror frame. Yet ultimately this *nouveau riche* opulence is subordinated to a strange silence and calm that completely contradict the portrait's initial assault upon our senses of sight and touch. For one, the mirror image that occupies the upper half of the painting provides a dull and hazy reflection that challenges the vivid clarity of the material world below . . .

Yet this dialogue between a real world and its dreamlike, immaterial reflection is not merely visual; it also involves the personality of the sitter A pampered creature of flesh as plump and cushioned as the sofa beneath her, she nevertheless becomes an enigmatic presence . . . a modern oracle presiding in the padded comfort of a mid-nineteenth-century drawing room. Her right hand, as pliable as a starfish, is posed weightlessly against her cheek and temple, as if enforcing her uncommon powers of wisdom and concentration; and her eyes, compressed forward with the total volume of the head, appear to observe us both directly and obliquely. And to enrich even more this aura of a tangible yet remote being, Ingres has cast her reflection in pure profile, a ghostly sibyl who gazes as sightlessly as a marble statue into an invisible world.¹⁵

Rosenblum's description is long and complicated. Like the painting itself, this passage demands slow, careful attention to many details. Even with a reproduction of the picture next to it, the text contains so many particulars about costume, setting, and sitter that it takes time to absorb. Only at the end is there an interpretation of the "personality of the sitter," based on visual elements that fit into what the reader already knows. "A pampered creature" makes sense because of the details in the previous paragraph, while the idea of "a tangible yet remote being" has been suggested already in the discussion of the "dull and hazy reflection that challenges the vivid clarity of the material world below."

Rosenblum wrote another description of the same painting, this one included in a history of 19th-century art. The differences between them are revealing. Instead of forming an image of the work in the mind of the reader, the goal of any ekphrastic passage, this text relates the picture to other works made during the same historical time. The author highlights those aspects of the painting that suit his historical argument as well as his characterization of the artist's style. In addition, the identity of the sitter, part of the history of the work as well as the period, plays an active role in the analysis.

[V]iewed through the lenses of period style, Ingres's portrait . . . make[s] us wallow in a plum-pudding richness of textures, materials, patterns that aspire to an airless density. Mme. Moitessier, of course, is a model of cool propriety in her wealthy Paris interior, and her posture alludes to classical prototypes; but she and Ingres clearly

revel in her sumptuous inventory of possessions: the gilt console, the tufted damask sofa, the Chinese vase, the peacock-feathered fan, the bracelets and brooch with their enormous gems, and above all the full cascade of the rose-patterned silk dress with its embellishments of fringes and ribbons. But Ingres . . . transcends the Second Empire period look through his own genius, which here ennoble the sitter not only with the abstract, yet sensual linear circuits that command the undulant shapes of fingers, shoulders, and arms, but through an adaptation of the common antique pose of contemplative head-on-hand . . .¹⁶

Like the passages quoted above, these two descriptions by Rosenblum depend upon the experience of many years spent looking and writing. Rich in language and disciplined in structure, they build sentence by sentence on what came before. The reader is not allowed to wander off the direction the author has set and is not left in doubt about what is being discussed. The details also build upon one another, so the relationships among them are made clear. All of these examples demonstrate what the best art historical writing can achieve.

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Formal Analysis

Formal analysis is a specific type of visual description. Unlike ekphrasis, it is not meant to evoke the work in the reader's mind. Instead it is an explanation of visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition. Strictly speaking, subject is not considered and neither is historical or cultural context. The purest formal analysis is limited to what the viewer sees. Because it explains how the eye is led through a work, this kind of description provides a solid foundation for other types of analysis. It is always a useful exercise, even when it is not intended as an end in itself.

The British art critic Roger Fry (1866-1934) played an important role in developing the language of formal analysis we use in English today. Inspired by modern art, Fry set out to escape the interpretative writing of Victorians like Ruskin. He wanted to describe what the viewer saw, independent of the subject of the work or its emotional impact. Relying in part upon late 19th- and early 20th-century studies of visual perception, Fry hoped to bring scientific rigor to the analysis of art. If all viewers responded to visual stimuli in the same way, he reasoned, then the essential features of a viewer's response to a work could be analyzed in absolute – rather than subjective or interpretative – terms. This approach reflected Fry's study of the natural sciences as an undergraduate. Even more important were his studies as a painter, which made him especially aware of the importance of how things had been made.¹⁷

The idea of analyzing a single work of art, especially a painting, in terms of specific visual components was not new. One of the most influential systems was created by the 17th-century French Academician Roger de Piles (1635-1709). His book, *The Principles of Painting*, became very popular throughout Europe and appeared in many languages. An 18th-century English edition translates de Piles's terms of analysis as: composition (made up of invention and disposition or design), drawing, color, and expression. These ideas and, even more, these words, gained additional fame in the English-speaking world when the painter and art critic Jonathan Richardson (1665-1745) included a version of

de Piles's system in a popular guide to Italy. Intended for travelers, Richardson's book was read by everyone who was interested in art. In this way, de Piles's terms entered into the mainstream of discussions about art in English.¹⁸

Like de Piles's system, Roger Fry's method of analysis breaks a work of art into component parts, but they are different ones. The key elements are (in Joshua Taylor's explanation):

Color, both as establishing a general key and as setting up a relationship of parts; *line*, both as creating a sense of structure and as embodying movement and character; *light and dark*, which created expressive forms and patterns at the same time as it suggested the character of volumes through light and shade; the sense of *volume* itself and what might be called *mass* as contrasted with space; and the concept of *plane*, which was necessary in discussing the organization of space, both in depth and in a two-dimensional pattern. Towering over all these individual elements was the *composition*, how part related to part and to whole: composition not as an arbitrary scheme of organization but as a dominant contributor to the expressive content of the painting.¹⁹

Fry first outlined his analytical approach in 1909, published in an article which was reprinted in 1920 in his book *Vision and Design*.²⁰

Some of the most famous examples of Fry's own analyses appear in *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*.²¹ Published in 1927, the book was intended to persuade readers that Cézanne was one of the great masters of Western art long before that was a generally accepted point of view. Fry made his argument through careful study of individual paintings, many in private collections and almost all of them unfamiliar to his readers. Although the book included reproductions of the works, they were small black-and-white illustrations, murky in tone and detail, which conveyed only the most approximate idea of the pictures. Furthermore, Fry warned his readers, "it must always be kept in mind that such [written] analysis halts before the ultimate concrete reality of the work of art, and perhaps in proportion to the greatness of the work it must leave untouched a greater part of the objective."²² In other words, the greater the work, the less it can be explained in writing. Nonetheless, he set out to make his case with words.

One of the key paintings in Fry's book is Cézanne's *Still-life with Compotier* (Private collection, Paris), painted about 1880. The lengthy analysis of the picture begins with a

description of the application of paint. This was, Fry felt, the necessary place of beginning because all that we see and feel ultimately comes from paint applied to a surface. He wrote: "Instead of those brave swashing strokes of the brush or palette knife [that Cézanne had used earlier], we find him here proceeding by the accumulation of small touches of a full brush."²³ This single sentence vividly outlines two ways Cézanne applied paint to his canvas ("brave, swashing strokes" versus "small touches") and the specific tools he used (brush and palette knife). As is often the case in Fry's writing, the words he chose go beyond what the viewer sees to suggest the process of painting, an explanation of the surface in terms of the movement of the painter's hand.

After a digression about how other artists handled paint, Fry returned to *Still-life with Comptoir*. He rephrased what he had said before, integrating it with a fuller description of Cézanne's technique:

[Cézanne] has abandoned altogether the sweep of a broad brush, and builds up his masses by a succession of hatched strokes with a small brush. These strokes are strictly parallel, almost entirely rectilinear, and slant from right to left as they descend. And this direction of the brush strokes is carried through without regard to the contours of the objects.²⁴

From these three sentences, the reader gathers enough information to visualize the surface of the work. The size of the strokes, their shape, the direction they take on the canvas, and how they relate to the forms they create are all explained. Already the painting seems very specific. On the other hand, the reader has not been given the most basic facts about what the picture represents. For Fry, that information only came after everything else, if it was mentioned at all.

Then Fry turned to "the organization of the forms and the ordering of the volumes." Three of the objects in the still-life are mentioned, but only as aspects of the composition.

Each form seems to have a surprising amplitude, to permit of our apprehending it with an ease which surprises us, and yet they admit a free circulation in the surrounding space. It is above all the main directions given by the rectilinear lines of the napkin and the knife that make us feel so vividly this horizontal extension [of space]. And this horizontal [visually] supports the spherical volumes, which enforce, far more than real apples could, the sense of their density and mass.

He continued in a new paragraph:

One notes how few the forms are. How the sphere is repeated again and again in varied quantities. To this is added the rounded oblong shapes which are repeated in two very distinct quantities in the compotier and the glass. If we add the continually repeated right lines [of the brush strokes] and the frequently repeated but identical forms of the leaves on the wallpaper, we have exhausted this short catalogue. The variation of quantities of these forms is arranged to give points of clear predominance to the compotier itself to the left, and the larger apples to the right centre. One divines, in fact, that the forms are held together by some strict harmonic principle almost like that of the canon in Greek architecture, and that it is this that gives its extraordinary repose and equilibrium to the whole design.²⁵

Finally the objects in the still-life have come into view: a compotier (or fruit dish), a glass, apples, and a knife, arranged on a cloth and set before patterned wallpaper.

In Fry's view of Cézanne, contour, or the edges of forms, are especially important. The Impressionists, Cézanne's peers and exact contemporaries, were preoccupied "by the continuity of the visual welt." For Cézanne, on the other hand, contour

became an obsession. We find the traces of this throughout this still-life. He actually draws the contour with his brush, generally in a bluish grey. Naturally the curvature of this line is sharply contrasted with his parallel hatchings, and arrests the eye too much. He then returns upon it incessantly by repeated hatchings which gradually heap up round the contour to a great thickness. The contour is continually being lost and then recovered . . . [which] naturally lends a certain heaviness, almost clumsiness, to the effect; but it ends by giving to the forms that impressive solidity and weight which we have noticed.²⁶

Fry ended his analysis with the shapes, conceived in three dimensions ("volumes") and in two dimensions ("contours"):

At first sight the volumes and contours declare themselves boldly to the eye. They are of a surprising simplicity, and are clearly apprehended. But the more one looks the more they elude any precise definition. The apparent continuity of the contour is illusory, for it changes in quality throughout each particle of its length. There is no uniformity in the tracing of the smallest curve. . . . We thus get at once the notion of

extreme simplicity in the general result and of infinite variety in every part. It is this infinitely changing quality of the very stuff of painting which communicates so vivid a sense of life. In spite of the austerity of the forms, all is vibration and movement.²⁷

Fry wrote with a missionary fervor, intent upon persuading readers of his point of view. In this respect, his writings resemble Ruskin's, although Fry replaced Ruskin's rich and complicated language with clear, spare words about paint and composition. A text by Fry like the one above provides the reader with tangible details about the way a specific picture looks, whereas Ruskin's text supplies an interpretation of its subject. Of course, different approaches may be inspired by the works themselves. Ignoring the subject is much easier if the picture represents a grouping of ordinary objects than if it shows a dramatic scene of storm and death at sea. The fact that Fry believed in Cézanne's art so deeply says something about what he believed was important in art. It also says something about the taste of the modern period, just as Ruskin's values and style of writing reveal things about the Victorian period. Nonetheless, anyone can learn a great deal from reading either of them.

Ellen Johnson, an art historian and art critic who wrote extensively about modern art, often used formal analysis. One example is a long description of Richard Diebenkorn's *Woman by a Large Window* (Allen Art Museum, Oberlin), which covers the arrangement of shapes into a composition, the application of paint, the colors, and finally the mood of the work. Although organized in a different order from Fry's analysis of Cézanne's still-life, her discussion defines the painting in similar terms.

[Diebenkorn's] particular way of forming the picture . . . is captivating, . . . organizing the picture plane into large, relatively open areas interrupted by a greater concentration of activity, a spilling of shapes and colors asymmetrically placed on one side of the picture. In *Woman by a Large Window* the asymmetry of the painting is further enhanced by having the figure not only placed at the left of the picture but, more daringly, facing directly out of the picture. This leftward direction and placement is brought into a precarious and exciting but beautifully controlled balance by the mirror on the right which . . . creates a fascinating ambiguity and enrichment of the picture space.

. . . The interior of the room and the woman in it are painted in subdued, desert-sand colors, roughly and vigorously applied with much of the drawing

achieved by leaving exposed an earlier layer of paint. The edges of the window, table and chair, and the contours of the figure, not to mention the purple eye, were drawn in this way. In other areas, the top layer, roughly applied as though with a scrub brush, is sufficiently thin to permit the under-color to show through and vary the surface hue. . . . [T]he landscape is more positive in hue and value contrasts and the paint more thick and rich. The bright apple-green of the fields and the very dark green of the trees are enlivened by smaller areas of orange, yellow and purple; the sky is intensely blue. The glowing landscape takes on added sparkle by contrast with the muted interior Pictorially, however, [the woman] is anchored to the landscape by the dark of her hair forming one value and shape with the trees behind her. This union of in and out, of near and far, repeated in the mirror image, emphasizes the plane of the picture, the two-dimensional character of which is further asserted by the planar organization into four horizontal divisions: floor, ledge, landscape and sky. Thus, while the distance of the landscape is firmly stated, it is just as firmly denied

While the mood of the picture is conveyed most obviously through the position and attitude of the figure, still the entire painting functions in evoking this response . . . Lonely but composed, withdrawn from but related to her environment, the woman reminds one of the self-contained, quiet and melancholy figures on Greek funerary reliefs. Like them, relaxed and still, she seems to have sat for centuries.²⁸

Johnson's description touches on all aspects of what the viewer sees before ending with a final paragraph about mood. Firmly situated in our understanding of specific physical and visual aspects of Diebenkorn's painting, her analogy to the seated women on Greek funerary reliefs enhances our ability to envision the position and spirit of this woman. It makes the picture seem vivid by referring to something entirely other. The image also is unexpected, so the description ends with an idea that catches our attention because it is new, while simultaneously summarizing an important part of her analysis. An allusion must work perfectly to be useful, however. Otherwise it becomes a distraction, a red herring that leads the reader away from the subject at hand.

The formal analysis of works other than paintings needs different words. In *Learning to Look*, Joshua Taylor identified three key elements that determine much of our response to works of sculpture. The artist "creates not only an object of a certain size

and weight but also a space that we experience in a specific way.” A comparison between an Egyptian seated figure (Louvre, Paris) and Giovanni da Bologna’s *Mercury* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) reveals two very different treatments of form and space:

The Egyptian sculptor, cutting into a block of stone, has shaped and organized the parts of his work so that they produce a particular sense of order, a unique and expressive total form. The individual parts have been conceived of as planes which define the figure by creating a movement from one part to another, a movement that depends on our responding to each new change in direction. . . . In this process our sense of the third-dimensional aspect of the work is enforced and we become conscious of the work as a whole. The movement within the figure is very slight, and our impression is one of solidity, compactness, and immobility.

In *Mercury*, on the other hand, “the movement is active and rapid.”

The sculptor’s medium has encouraged him to create a free movement around the figure and out into the space in which the figure is seen. This space becomes an active part of the composition. We are conscious not only of the actual space displaced by the figure, as in the former piece, but also of the space seeming to emanate from the figure of Mercury. The importance of this expanding space for the statue may be illustrated if we imagine this figure placed in a narrow niche.

Although it might fit physically, its rhythms would seem truncated, and it would suffer considerably as a work of art. The Egyptian sculpture might not demand so particular a space setting, but it would clearly suffer in assuming Mercury’s place as the center piece of a splashing fountain.²⁹

Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) also used formal analysis, but as it relates to the process of perception and psychology, specifically Gestalt psychology, which he studied in Berlin during the 1920s. Less concerned with aesthetic qualities than the authors quoted above, he was more rigorous in his study of shapes, volumes, and composition. In his best-known book, *Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, first published in 1954, Arnheim analyzed, in order: balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, color, movement, tension, and expression.³⁰ Many of the examples given in the text are works of art, but he made it clear that the basic principles relate to any kind of visual experience. In other books, notably *Visual Thinking and the Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, Arnheim developed the idea that visual

perception is itself a kind of thought.³¹ Seeing and comprehending what has been seen are two different aspects of the same mental process. This was not a new idea, but he explored it in relation to many specific visual examples.

Arnheim began with the assumption that any work of art is a composition before it is anything else:

When the eyes meet a particular picture for the first time, they are faced with the challenge of the new situation: they have to orient themselves, they have to find a structure that will lead the mind to the picture's meaning. If the picture is representational, the first task is to understand the subject matter. But the subject matter is dependent on the form, the arrangement of the shapes and colors, which appears in its pure state in "abstract," non-mimetic works.³²

To explain how different uses of a central axis alter compositional structure, for example, Arnheim compared El Greco's *Expulsion from the Temple* (Frick Collection, New York) to Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (San Marco, Florence). About the first, Arnheim wrote:

The central object reposes in stillness even when within itself it expresses strong action. The Christ . . . is a typical *figura serpentinata* [spiral figure]. He chastises the merchant with a decisive swing of the right arm, which forces the entire body into a twist. The figure as a whole, however, is firmly anchored in the center of the painting, which raises the event beyond the level of a passing episode. Although entangled with the temple crowd, Christ is a stable axis around which the noisy happening churns.³³

Although his discussion identifies the forms in terms of subject, Arnheim's only concern is the way the composition works around its center. The same is true in his discussion of Fra Angelico's fresco:

As soon as we split the compositional space down the middle, its structure changes. It now consists of two halves, each organized around its own center. . . . Appropriate compositional features must bridge the boundary. Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* at San Marco, for example, is subdivided by a prominent frontal column, which distinguishes the celestial realm of the angel from the earthly realm of the Virgin. But the division is countered by the continuity of the space behind the column. The space is momentarily covered but not interrupted by the vertical in the foreground.

The lively interaction between the messenger and recipient also helps bridge the separation.³⁴

All formal analysis identifies specific visual elements and discusses how they work together. If the goal of a writer is to explain how parts combine to create a whole, and what effect that whole has on the viewer, then this type of analysis is essential. It also can be used to define visual characteristics shared by a number of objects. When the similarities seem strong enough to set a group of objects apart from others, they can be said to define a "style." Stylistic analysis can be applied to everything from works made during a single period by a single individual to a survey of objects made over centuries. All art historians use it.

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