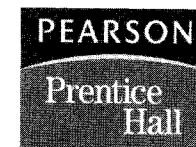


A Short Guide To Writing about Art

NINTH EDITION

SYLVAN BARNET
Tufts University



Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

- ❑ Does the paper have a thesis, a point?
- ❑ Do I support my argument with sufficient persuasive detail?
- ❑ Have I kept the needs of my audience in mind—for instance, have I defined unfamiliar terms?
- ❑ Is the paper organized, and is the organization clear to the reader?
- ❑ Have I set forth my views effectively and yet not talked too much about myself?
- ❑ Does the essay fulfill the assignment (length, scope)?

3

ANALYTIC THINKING

To think is to disturb one's thoughts.

—Jean Rostand

All art is at once surface and symbol.

—Oscar Wilde

There's more to the picture
Than meets the eye,
Hey hey, my my.

—Neil Young

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* (see page 49), the youth who with a slingshot killed the heavily armed giant Goliath, 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 the statue 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? Statues of Greek heroes and gods were nude, so

Michelangelo dressed—so to speak—his David in heroic or even godlike nudity. Further physical beauty can serve as a metaphor representing spiritual strength)

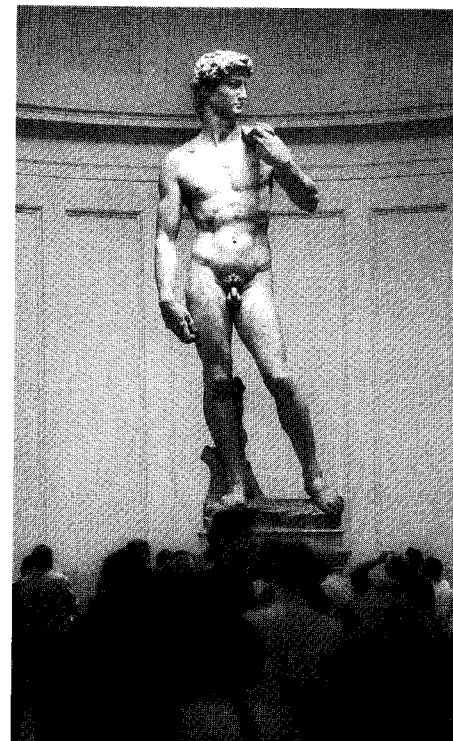
- Its size (here, in this over-life-size figure, man as hero)
- Its context, especially its site in the sixteenth century (today it stands in the rotunda of the Academy of Fine Arts, but in 1504 it stood at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio—the town hall—where it embodied the principle of the citizen-warrior and signified the victory of republicanism over tyranny)

Consider as well 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; 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? What 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* (1508–1512) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (see page 50). 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.

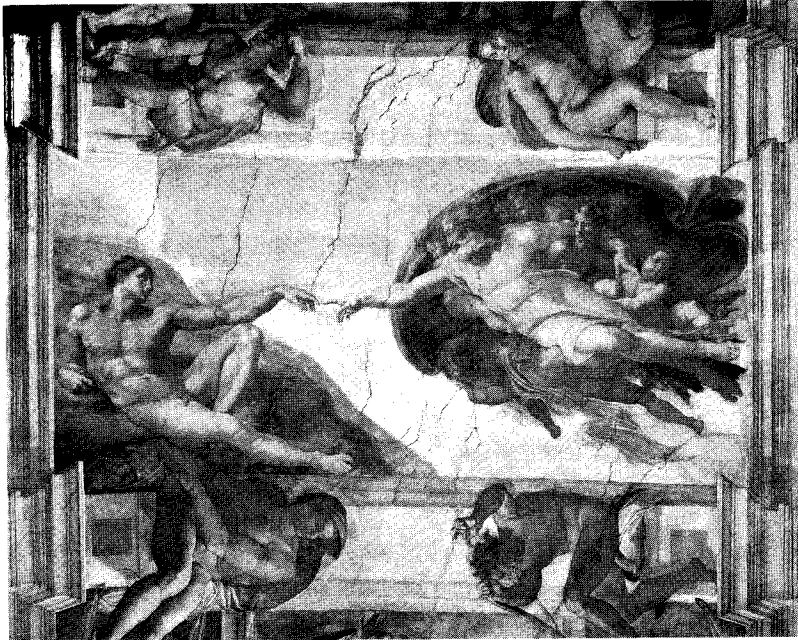
The “story” of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, is understood by every reader of the book of Genesis. But even the story is modified in a way that makes it more comprehensible and impressive to the eye. The Creator, instead of breathing a living soul into 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



Michelangelo's statue of *David*, 1501–1504. Marble, 13'5". Accademia, Florence. Photographer: David Buffington. Getty Images, Inc. – Photodisc.

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



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–1512. Fresco, 9'2" × 18'8". (Detail of Sistine Chapel Ceiling). Vatican Palace, Vatican State, Italy. Photographer: Scala. Art Resource, N.Y. © Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

that distinguishes artistic experience from the detached acceptance of information.

—Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1974), 458–460

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*. (Later in this chapter, on pages 52–55, we will see that the content or meaning is expressed through the *style* or *form*.)

The study of artistic images and the cultural thoughts and attitudes that they reflect is called iconology (see pages 240–45). Two sculptures of the same subject matter—for instance, the Crucifixion—can express different meanings:

- Christ's conquest of death (head high, eyes open, face composed, arms horizontal, body relatively straight and self-possessed, fully clothed with an ankle-length tunic of a king).
- 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, body vulnerable because clothed only with a loincloth).

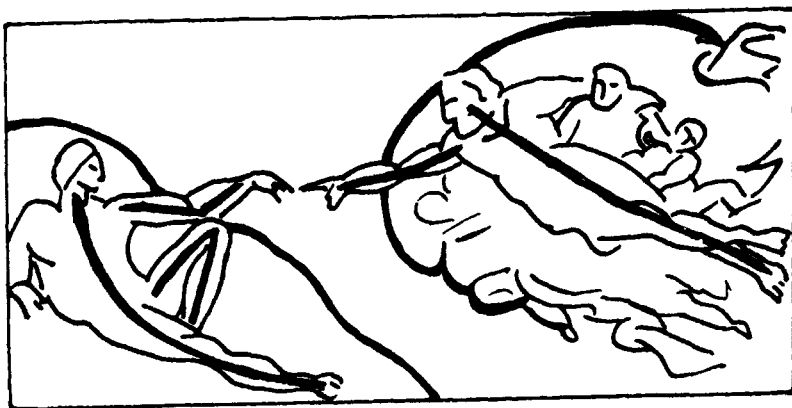
The subject matter in both is the same—the Crucifixion—but the meaning or content (conquest of death in one image, painful death in the other) is utterly different. The image of Christ Triumphant—Christ as Divine Ruler and Judge—was common in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; the Suffering Christ, emphasizing the humanity or mortal aspect of Jesus, was common in the late thirteenth and 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.



Rudolf Arnheim, diagram of Michelangelo's *Creation*. (Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Copyright © 1954 The Regents of the University of California (University of California Press, 1974, pp. 458–460.)

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

Are the lines of a drawing thick or thin, curved or straight, 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 such as Jean-François Millet's *The Winnower* (1848), 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. In an age when most paintings had smooth surfaces, Millet's style as well as his content was revolutionary. The critic Théophile Gautier said that Millet "trowels on top of his dishcloth of a canvas, without oil or turpentine, vast masonries of paint so dry that no varnish could quench its thirst."

For obvious examples of artists who use contrasting media, compare a work by an Action painter of the 1940s and the 1950s such as Jackson Pollock with a work by a Pop artist such as Andy Warhol or Robert Indiana. Whereas Pollock executed apparently free, spontaneous, self-expressive nonfigurative paintings—as you can see from the illustration on page 363, the marks on the canvas almost let us see the painter in the *act* of brushing or dribbling or spattering the pigment—Pop artists tended to favor commonplace images (e.g., Warhol's Campbell's soup cans) and impersonal media such as the serigraph. Pop works call to mind not the individual artist but anonymous commercial art and the machine,



Andy Warhol. (1928–1987).
Gold Marilyn Monroe. 1962.
 Synthetic polymer paint,
 silkscreened, and oil on
 canvas, 6'11¼" × 57". Gift of
 Philip Johnson. (316.1962).
 Copyright The Andy Warhol
 Foundation for the Visual
 Arts/ARS, NY. Location:
 The Museum of Modern
 Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.
 Digital Image © The
 Museum of Modern
 Art/Licensed by Scala – Art
 Resource, NY.

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."

Let's think about the "meaning" of Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962), a work produced—we can even say manufactured—shortly after Monroe's death. Warhol used a publicity photograph of 1952 or 1954 and, with assistants in a studio that he called the Factory, made a silk-screen print. In this process, a stencil is applied to a screen of silk or nylon or polyester with a fine mesh that has been stretched on a frame, or an impermeable substance such as glue is applied to some areas of the fabric. Warhol in fact used a later variant of the process; a photographic stencil is produced by attaching light-sensitive gelatin to the screen. Ink or paint is pressed with a squeegee through the part of the fabric that is not protected by the stencil or the hardened glue or gelatin; thus, the

image appears on the printing surface, usually paper or canvas, that is beneath the mesh.

This method of printing is hardly suited to subtle details, and the lack of subtlety is part of the meaning: Ordinarily we assume that a portrait artist wishes, by looking intently at the subject, to reveal that subject's appearance and personality by means of minute touches, but Warhol began not with a live model but with a publicity photo, and he used assistants in a studio that he called the Factory, producing an image that inevitably is a bit crude, rather like a colored image in a newspaper, where the colors are sometimes misaligned. The critic Adam Gopnik shrewdly characterized Warhol's characteristic use of pink, red, lemon, turquoise, and so on as his "lipstick-and-peroxide palette" (*New Yorker*, April 10, 1989, page 109). The image of Monroe—just her head—is printed on a canvas that is almost 7 feet tall and almost 5 feet wide, to which gold paint has been applied in a somewhat slapdash manner. Marilyn is a star in heaven, yes, but in a tacky tinsel-town heaven, a Hollywood heaven, a place manufactured by publicity departments. As Marshall McLuhan famously put it, "The Medium is the Message." Warhol's medium—a publicity photograph transferred into silk-screen print with slightly misaligned garish colors, printed by assistants on an unusually large surface—cannot be separated from the meaning of the work. *Gold Marilyn Monroe* means or says that Marilyn was and is a manufactured image.

In short, to get at the content or meanings of a work we usually need to interpret

- the subject matter
- the material and the form (size, shape, texture, color, and the like)
- the sociohistoric context
- perhaps the artist's intentions (if known)

We also have to recognize that our own sociohistoric 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, you may recall from Chapter 1 (page 27), says that because the perceiver's eye "is regulated by need and prejudice" the eye "does not so much mirror as take and make." One also hears that all interpretations—all discussions of content—are misinterpretations and that no standards (e.g., common sense or the artist's intention) can guide us in evaluating different interpretations.

GETTING IDEAS FOR ESSAYS: 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.” But how do you get ideas? As the next few pages will indicate, the best way to get ideas is to confront puzzling questions.

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. These are not naive questions, questions asked only by inexperienced viewers. They are questions that occupy the minds of professional art historians and critics. For instance, Evelyn Welch in her *Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500* (1997) says,

Part I of this book asked questions about what an object was made from, how it was made, for whom, and by whom. It finished by asking how . . . posthumous fame was guaranteed for a number of Renaissance artists. Part II, which looks particularly at art in sacred settings, asks to what purpose this effort was directed.

To attempt an answer, however partial, we need to know something about the original function and meaning of the works illustrated in this book. For example, where were they located? Who could have seen them and when? How were viewers supposed to behave in front of such objects and how did they actually behave? (133)

Here, then, are some basic questions:

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, where, and why was the work made? By whom, and for whom? In short, **What is the cultural context?** Was the purpose to stimulate religious devotion? To impress the viewer with the owner’s power? To enhance family pride? To teach? To delight? To express the artist’s feelings? Does the work present a likeness, or express a feeling, or illustrate a mystery? 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 generalities.)

What did the work originally look like? Paper and silk darken, paintings crack, sculptures—even of marble or bronze—change color over the centuries, buildings decay and are renovated.

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 do the physical properties and the form contribute? Take account of (a) *the material* (for instance, polished marble vs. unpainted wood, or transparent watercolor vs. opaque oil paint, or oil paint thinly applied vs. oil paint so thickly applied that it gives the canvas a rough texture); (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?).

What is the title? Does it help to illuminate 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, so it is now called *The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq*. And we have already noticed, on pages 13, 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 short, you will have some ideas, material that you will draw on and will take shape when you are called on to write. And these ideas will get you going: They will give you confidence that you have something to say, and you therefore will not suffer from the self-doubt that engenders writer's block.

Following are additional questions to ask, first on drawing and painting, then on sculpture, architecture, photography, and video art. An unanswered question is an essay topic in disguise.

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 at length in English 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). Today much art criticism concerns gazing, and the implication is that the person who gazes is in fact a voyeur, who derives both pleasure and power from the act of looking. In Mary Cassatt's *Woman in Black at*

the Opera (c. 1878; also called *In the Loge* and *At the Français, a Sketch*), however, there is not so simple a dichotomy as male-looker and female-looked-at. 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; does the person who is looking at the picture—yet another, the viewer—see power as located in the woman rather than in the man—or does the man's voyeuristic activity undermine the woman's apparent power?

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?

Let's now consider **portrait** painting. The old idea was that a good portrait not only describes the face but also characterizes the personality of the sitter. The face was said to be the index of the personality; thus, an accurate portrait of King X showed his cruelty (it was written all over his



Mary Stevenson Cassatt (American, 1844–1926), *In the Loge*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 32 × 26 in. (81.28 × 66.04 cm.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Hayden Collection – Charles Henry Hayden Fund, 10.35. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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 of the sitter.

How are their interpretations conveyed? Consider such matters as these:

- How much of the figure does the artist show (just the face, or the face and bust, or the full figure?), and how much of the available space does the artist cause the figure to occupy? What effects are thus gained? For instance, if the figure occupies almost all of the pictorial space, it probably will seem commanding, even aggressive, threatening to move into the viewer's space.
- What do the clothing, furnishings, accessories (swords, dogs, clocks, and so forth), background, angle of the head or posture of the head and body, direction of the gaze, 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? If accessories and suggestions of a particular setting are absent, does the absence suggest timelessness—as when, for instance, a saint is depicted against a uniform gold background?
- 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: What sort of identity is presented—social or psychological? That is, does the image present a strong sense of social class, for instance, king (the image evokes the principles implicit in kingship), soldier, merchant, or (as in many Renaissance portraits) beautiful-wife-of-a-wealthy-man; or, on the other hand, does the image present a strong sense of psychology—a sense of an independent inner life (as is usual in portraits by Rembrandt)?
- Is the picture largely an advertisement of the sitter (as is common in pictures commissioned by sitters or members of their family), or is it largely concerned with the painter's response to the sitter

(as is common since the late nineteenth century, when artists working with dealers had a larger market)?

- 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 context, whereas a profile is relatively unexpressive and seems apart from any social interaction. 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—for instance, of a married couple—does the artist reveal what it is that ties the two figures together? (A sixteenth-century double portrait by Lorenzo Lotto shows Cupid hovering behind the couple; he holds a yoke above them.) 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.
- To what extent does the artist's style—let's say, fine wiry lines, or vigorous brush strokes, or flat colors—create the alleged character of the sitter?
- 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 1940s, “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? Although George Orwell said that by the age of fifty everyone has the face he or she deserves, Max Beerbohm took the opposite view: “So few people look like themselves.” The critic Roger Fry took Beerbohm’s view; looking at John Singer Sargent’s portrait titled *General Sir Ian Hamilton*, Fry said, “I cannot see the man for his likeness.” Sargent, by the way, said that he saw an animal in every sitter.

A good deal of **recent portraiture**—say, from the 1980s onward—probably in response to a heightened awareness of gender identity, AIDS, multicultural identity, and televised images of human suffering—emphasizes the subject’s vulnerability or instability. It may, for example, show a face ravaged by disease, thus calling into question the values set forth by more traditional portraiture (female beauty, male power); in fact, it calls into question the old idea of the possibility of a unified, stable subject. Example: Tom Knechtel’s self-portrait titled *A Middle-Aged Scheherazade* (1997) not only shows the bearded male artist in a female role but also shows him with two faces, one smiling, one brooding. For a discussion of this image and others, see Michael Duncan in *Art in America*, October 1999: 124–131.

For a student’s discussion of two portraits by John Singleton Copley, see page 141. For a professional art historian’s discussion of Anthony Van Dyck’s portrait of Charles I, see pages 208–09. For brief, useful survey of the topic, see Joanna Woodall’s introduction to a collection of essays, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, edited by Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). For another short book on the topic with suggestions for further reading, see Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Also useful on matters of portraiture and gender is Gill Perry, ed., *Gender and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

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 skill with which the painter captures the transparency of glass, the reflection of light

on silver, the textures of ham and cheese and a lemon rind? Or is the interest chiefly in the relationships between the shapes? 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 the picture give us realism or “seeming realism”: that is, by means of realism does it offer allegorical implications? For instance, does it imply transience, perhaps by a burnt-out candle or a clay pipe (in the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 102 says, “For my days are consumed like smoke”) or even merely by the perishable nature of the objects (food, flowers) displayed? Other common symbols of *vanitas* (Latin for “nothing” or “emptiness,” particularly the emptiness of earthly possessions and accomplishments) are a mouse nibbling at food, 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? Does the picture merely call our attention to things? Consult Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (1997); Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (1999); and Erika Langmuir, *Still Life* (2001).

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., happy shepherds—perhaps picnicking or flirting beside their flocks—or aristocrats lounging complacently beneath the mighty oaks that symbolize their ancient power and grandeur), or are the figures dwarfed by nature’s awe-inspiring sublimity? 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? Remember: The representation of the natural world is not wholly objective.

- What do human constructions in the landscape—for instance, cottages, or crumbling ruins, or fortifications—say about the relation of human beings to the countryside?
- Do the natural objects in the landscape (e.g., billowy clouds or dark clouds, 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].)
- If there are no signs of people—not even ruins of ancient buildings—does the picture say something about the grandeur of God, the region as an unspoiled paradise, or perhaps a heroic, ordered, highly structured world of ideal beauty?

In short, a picture showing a landscape nicely fits Emile Zola's definition of a work of art as “a corner of nature seen through a temperament.” Such a work 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.*

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

*For an analysis employing recent critical approaches, see Mark Roskill, *The Language of Landscape*, 1996. For a readable discussion of how art turns or constructs land into landscape, see Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 1999. Andrews's book includes an especially valuable “Bibliographic Essay.”

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?

- If the drawing was made with a wet medium (e.g., ink applied with a pen or washes applied with a brush), what did 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.)
- If the drawing was made with a dry medium (e.g., silverpoint, charcoal, chalk, or pencil), what did 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 wet medium, where the motion of the instrument must be interrupted in order to replenish the ink or paint, will differ from a drawing executed with a dry medium such as graphite.**

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

**For a well-illustrated, readable introduction to the physical properties of drawings, see Susan Lambert, *Reading Drawings* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). For a more detailed but somewhat drier account, see James Watrous, *The Craft of Old-Master Drawings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957).

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. **Acrylic paint**, a synthetic developed in the mid-twentieth century, has been widely used for abstract expressionism, pop art, and color field painting. Highly versatile, it can be brushed, poured, sprayed, or applied with a sponge onto unsized canvas. It soaks into the canvas, dries quickly, and can give a sort of watercolor look, but (like oil and unlike watercolor) it can be reworked.

The material value of a pigment—that is to say, its cost—may itself be expressive. For instance, Velázquez'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 lesser mortals.

Caution: Reproductions in books usually fail to convey the texture of brush strokes.

Is the **color** imitative of appearances or symbolically expressive, or both? An example of symbolic color is the uniform gold background of some medieval Christian painting, which is meant to represent heaven and to convey the beauty, unity, and (because gold is impervious to change) the unchanging nature of God. (In Buddhist art, the flesh of the Buddha is gold, symbolizing his illumination or enlightenment, i.e., his perfect knowledge.) Blue is conventionally used for the cloak of the Virgin Mary, signifying her heavenly nature. But artists may, so to speak, invent their own symbolic conventions: Picasso used white, grays, and black for *Guernica*, when in fact the Spanish fascists bombarded the Basque town on a sunny day. In looking at a picture, ask yourself how the colors are related—for instance, by bold contrasts or by gradual transitions.

Vincent van Gogh, speaking of his own paintings, 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-Bergère*, 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 crème 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" or "deeper." The highest value is white; the lowest is black. Light gray has a higher value than dark gray. *Saturation* (also called *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* (colors opposite on the color wheel: 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.

*See a four-volume series (three volumes published as of 2006) called *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics* (1994–), various editors. For a more philosophic analysis, see John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (1999).

- 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? In Rembrandt's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646) the careful viewer sees that the light does *not* come from the lanterns held by the shepherds but miraculously comes from the manger. Something of the same idea is seen in an early nineteenth-century magazine illustration (see page 69), where the light has no visible source; rather, it is a spiritual force indicating the union (in an otherwise dark world) of the praying child with God.

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** or **design**—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. For instance, is the composition:

- symmetrically balanced (and perhaps therefore monumental, or quiet, or rigid and oppressive)?
- diagonally recessive and perhaps, therefore, as in Munch's *The Scream* (see page 70),^{*} dramatic or even melodramatic, conveying swift recession or a disturbing thrust into the viewer's space.

Are figures harmoniously related, perhaps by a similar stance or shared action, in which case they can be said to balance or echo each other, or are

^{*}For a further comment on *The Scream*, see page 206.

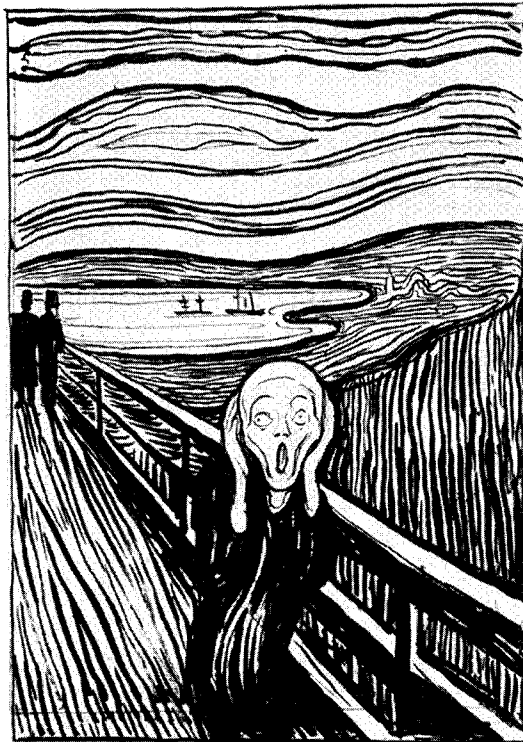
they opposed, perhaps by diagonals thrusting at each other? Speaking generally—very generally—**diagonals** may suggest motion or animation or instability, except when they form a triangle resting on its base, which is a highly stable form. **Horizontal lines** suggest tranquility or stability—think of plains or of reclining figures. **Vertical lines**—tree trunks thrusting straight up, or people standing, or upright lances as in Velázquez'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



Image of a boy praying, from *American Sunday School Teacher's Magazine* (July 1824, p. 257). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Edvard Munch (1863–1944). *The Scream*. 1896.
Lithograph, printed in black composition: 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 10".
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by
Scala/Art Resource, NY.

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 farther 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. For an example of hierarchic scale, see the sculpture by Olowe of Ise, on page 244, where the senior queen is the largest figure, the king the second largest, and the two attendants, at the king's feet, are the smallest because they are the least important.)
- *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. The illusion of distance is created by decreased clarity. 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 8 or 9 feet high—will produce an effect different from one 8 or 9 inches high. A colossal image normally implies a subject of great importance, a miniature

*In the Renaissance, perspective was used chiefly to create a coherent space and to locate objects within that space, but later artists have sometimes made perspective expressive. Giorgio de Chirico, for example, often gives a distorted perspective that unnerves the viewer. Or consider van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*. Although van Gogh said that the picture conveyed "rest," viewers find the swift recession disturbing. Indeed, the perspective in this picture is impossible: If one continues the diagonal of the right-hand wall by extending the dark line at the base, one sees that the bed's rear right foot would be jammed into the wall.

may imply delicacy and preciousness and perhaps an especially intimate relationship between the depicted object (usually a person) and the viewer for whom it was made. If you are working from a reproduction, be sure, therefore, to ascertain the size of the original. If you are writing about a work that you know only from a reproduction in a book, be sure to check the caption for information about its size and then try to visualize 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.

A Note on Nonobjective or Nonrepresentational Painting. We have already noticed (page 52) Wassily Kandinsky's comment that "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*." Kandinsky (1866–1944), particularly in his paintings and writings of 1910–1914, has at least as good a title as anyone else to being called the founder of twentieth-century **nonobjective art** (also called **nonrepresentational art**). Nonobjective art, unlike figurative art, depends entirely on the emotional significance of color, form, texture, size, and spatial relationships rather than on representational forms.

The term *nonobjective art* includes **abstract expressionism**—a term especially associated with the work of New York painters in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), who, deeply influenced by Kandinsky, sought to allow the unconscious to express itself. Nonobjective art is considered synonymous with **pure abstract art**, but it is *not* synonymous with "abstract art," since in most of what is generally called abstract art, forms are recognizable though simplified.

In several rather mystical writings, but especially in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), Kandinsky advanced theories that exerted a great influence on American art after World War II. For Kandinsky, colors were something to be felt and heard. When he set out to paint, he wrote, he "let himself go. . . . Not worrying about houses or trees, I spread strips and dots of paint on the canvas with my palette knife and let them sing out as loudly as I could."

Nonobjective painting is by no means all of a piece; it includes, to consider only a few examples, not only the lyrical, highly fluid forms of Kandinsky and of Jackson Pollock but also the pronounced vertical and horizontal compositions of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and the bold,

rough slashes of black on white of Franz Kline (1910–1962), although Kline's titles sometimes invite the viewer to see the slashes as representations of the elevated railway of Kline's earlier years in New York City. Nonobjective painting is not so much a style as a philosophy of art. In their works, and in their writings and their comments, many nonobjective painters emphasized the importance of the unconscious and of chance. Their aim in general was to convey feelings with little or no representation of external forms; the work on the canvas conveyed not images of things visible in the world, but intuitions of spiritual realities. Notice that this is *not* to say that the paintings are "pure form" or that subject matter is unimportant in nonobjective art. To the contrary, the artists often insisted that their works were concerned with what really was real—the essence behind appearances—and that their works were not merely pretty decorations. Two Abstract Expressionists, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), emphasized this point in a letter published in the *New York Times* in 1943:

There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

—Quoted in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980*,
ed. Ellen H. Johnson (1982), 14

Similarly, Jackson Pollock, speaking in 1950 of his abstract works created in part by spattering paint and by dribbling paint from the can, insisted that the paintings were not mere displays of a novel technique and were not mere designs:

It doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.

—Quoted in *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980*,
ed. Ellen H. Johnson (1982), 10

For a photograph of Pollock working with his "poured" or "drip" technique, where the lines on the canvas refer not to objects but only to the gestures that made the lines, see page 363.

The **titles** of nonobjective pictures occasionally suggest a profound content (e.g., Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret*, Rothko's *Vessels of Magic*), occasionally a more ordinary one (Pollock's *Blue Poles*), and occasionally something in between (Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*), but one can

judge a picture by its title only about as well as one can judge a book by its cover (i.e., sometimes well, sometimes not at all). Richard Serra (b. 1939) says that the titles of his prints (for instance, *Bessie Smith*, *Malcolm X*, and *Screech*) are meaningless, and maybe they are, or maybe he is now trying to cover his tracks.

In writing about the work of nonobjective painters, you may get some help from their writings, though of course you may come to feel in some cases that the paintings do not do what the painters say they want the pictures to do. Good sources for statements by artists are *Theories of Modern Art* (1984), ed. Herschel B. Chipp; *American Artists on Art from 1940 to 1980* (1982), ed. Ellen H. Johnson; *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* (2002), ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood; and *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (1996), ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. (In reading the comments of artists, however, it is often useful to recall Claes Oldenburg's remark that anyone who listens to an artist talk should have his eyes examined.)

Finally, here is a comment about a severely geometric nonobjective picture by Frank Stella (b. 1936) (see page 75). The picture, one of Stella's Protractor series, is 10 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Robert Rosenblum writes:

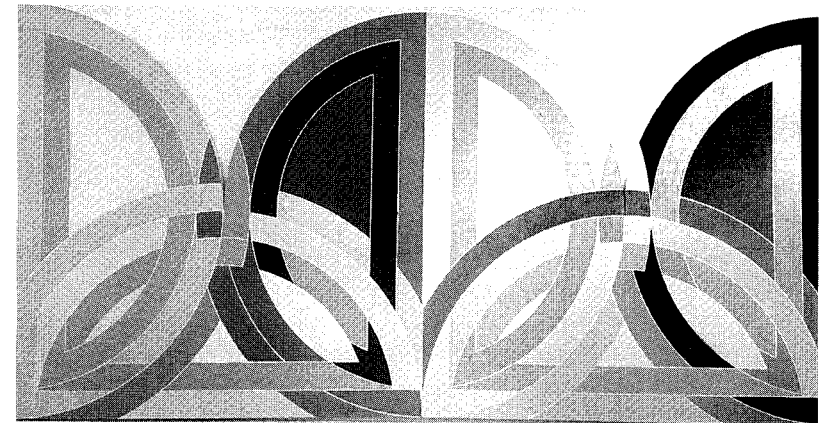
Confronted with a characteristic example, *Tahkt-i-Sulayman I*, the eye and the mind are at first simply dumbfounded by the sheer multiplicity of springing rhythms, fluorescent Day-Glo colors, and endlessly shifting planes—all the more so, because the basic components (circles and semicircles; flat bands of unmodulated color) and the basic design (here a clear bilateral symmetry) are so lucid. But again, as always in Stella's work, the seeming economy of vocabulary is countered by the elusive complexities of the result. At first glance, the overriding pattern is of such insistent symmetrical clarity that we feel we can seize predictable principles of organization and bring to rest this visual frenzy. But Stella permits no such static resolution, for the overall symmetries of the design are contradicted by both the interlace patterns and the colors, which constantly assert their independence from any simple-minded scheme. In a surprising way, this tangle of gyrating energies, released and recaptured, provides a 1960s ruler-and-compass equivalent of the finest Pollocks, even in terms of its engulfing scale (here 20 feet wide), which imposes itself in an almost physical way upon the spectator's world. In this case, the springing vaults of the arcs, some reaching as high as 4 feet above one's head, turn the painting into something that

verges on the architectural, a work that might rest on the floor and be subject to natural physical laws of load and support. Seen on this immense scale, the thrusts and counterthrusts, the taut and perfect spanning of great spaces, the razor-sharp interlocking of points of stress all contrive to plunge the observer into a dizzying tour-de-force of aesthetic engineering.

—Frank Stella (1971), 48–49

What brief advice can be given about responding to nonobjective painting? Perhaps only this (and here is something of a repetition of what has already been said about representational drawings and paintings): As you look at the work, begin with your responses to the following:

- The dynamic interplay of colors, shapes, lines, textures (of pigments and of the ground on which the pigments are applied)
- The size of the work (often so large that you may have to crane your neck to see it)
- The shape of the work (most are rectangular or square, but especially in the 1960s many are triangular, circular, chevron-shaped, diamond-shaped, and so on, with the result that, because they depart from the traditional shape of paintings, they seem almost to be objects—two-dimensional (or even three-dimensional) sculptures attached to a wall rather than paintings)



Frank Stella, *Tahkt-i-Sulayman I*, 1967. Fluorescent acrylic canvas, 10' × 20'. © 2006 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

- The degree to which the artist's hand ("touch") is evident (in the Color Field paintings of a stain painter such as Helen Frankenthaler, where unprimed canvas soaked up spilled acrylic paint, touch is almost completely absent)
- The title

Later, as has been suggested, you may want to think about the picture in the context of statements made by the artist—for instance, Pollock's "My concern is with the rhythms of nature, the way the ocean moves. I work inside out, like nature." Useful sources include the four collections of comments mentioned on page 74.

Finally, remember that making a comparison is one of the most effective ways of seeing things. How does this work differ from that work, and what is the effect of the difference?

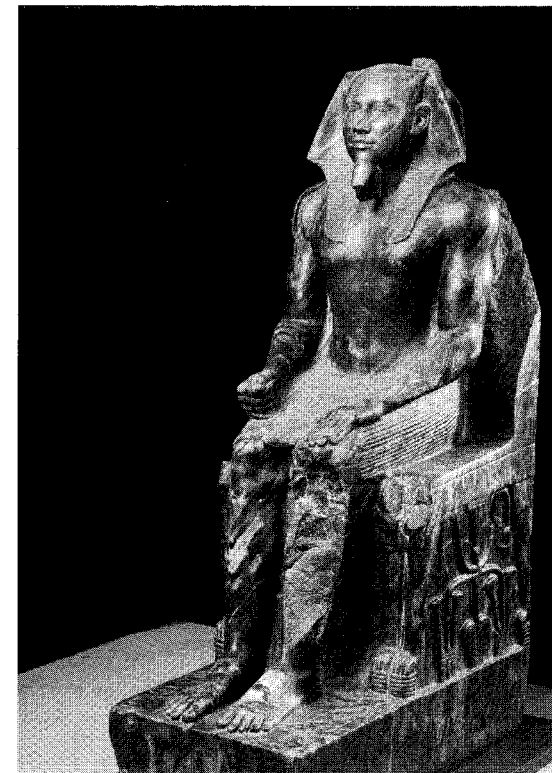
Sculpture

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 Chefren* (also called Khafre; Egyptian, third millennium BC; see page 77) suggest about the man? What is the relationship of naturalism to idealism or abstraction? (On realism and idealism, see pages 127–29.) 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 Chefren as the son of an Egyptian deity), how are the two qualities portrayed?

If the work is a **portrait**, many of the questions suggested earlier for painted portraits (pages 59–62) may be relevant. Consider especially whether the work presents a strong sense of an individual or, on the other hand, of a social type (e.g., military leader, philanthropist). 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, sub-Saharan 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



Statue of Khufre. Giza Valley Temple of Khafre. Dynasty 4 c. 2520–2494 BCE. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photographer: Araldo de Luca/The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Index Ricerca Iconografica.

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"?

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* (page 49), 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 Khafre* (see page 77), in contrast to the open form of *Mercury* (page 39), implies stability and permanence. Put it this way: A closed form seems balanced and self-contained, whereas an open form seems unbalanced and reacting to the space around it.

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.)

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 in imitation of an ancient bust? Does the sitter's garment establish the termination, perhaps with flowing draperies that lend animation? Or is the termination deliberately irregular, perhaps emphasizing the bust as a work of art rather than as a realistic reproduction of the subject? Does the head seem to emerge from a base of uncarved stone or wood?

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 Khafre have the same effect if it were in clay instead of in highly polished diorite? Because diorite is hard, it requires a great deal of work to carve it; thus, a statue of diorite expressed wealth and enduring power. Can one imagine Daniel Chester French's marble statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln

*Media and techniques are lucidly discussed by Nicholas Penny in *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Also useful is a brief treatment, Jane Basset and Peggy Fogelman, *Looking at European Sculpture: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 1997).

Memorial, done in stainless steel? What are the associations of the material? For instance, early in the twentieth century welded iron suggested heavy-duty industry, in contrast with bronze and marble, which suggested nobility, the classical world, and great wealth. In the late twentieth century, many sculptors used fragile nontraditional material—in a moment we will discuss such a work by Eva Hesse that uses bedsheets and cord—partly to mock the idea that art is precious and enduring. Perhaps the extreme example is Dieter Roth's sculpture made of dirt and rabbit feces at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum.

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 also 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 Man* (see page 211), 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* (see page 49), 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 Khafre* (see page 77) with Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* (see page 39). *King Khafre* was carved; the sculptor, so to speak, cut away from the block everything that did not look like Khafre. *Mercury* was modeled—built up—in clay or wax and then cast in bronze. The massiveness or stability of *King Khafre* partakes of the solidity of stone,

*"Modeling" is also used to refer to the treatment of volumes in a sculpture. Deep modeling, characterized by conspicuous projections and recesses, for instance, in drapery, creates strong contrasts in highlights and shadows. On the other hand, shallow modeling creates a relatively unified surface.

whereas the elegant motion of *Mercury* suggests the pliability of clay, wax, and bronze.

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 façade of the architecture?

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—the emotional resonance—of the whiteness of George Segal's plaster casts (see page 82) 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? Alienation?

What is the **scale** (size in relation to something else, usually to the subject in real life, or to the viewer)? Obviously the impact of a larger-than-life image differs from the impact of a miniature.

What was the original **location** or **site** or physical context (e.g., a pediment, a niche, a public square)?

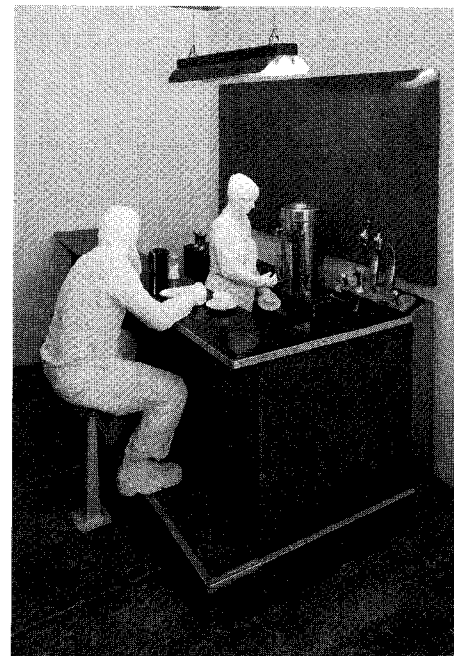
Is the **base** a part of the sculpture (e.g., rocks, or a tree trunk that helps to support the figure), and, if so, is it expressive as well as functional? George Grey Barnard's *Lincoln—the Man*, a bronze figure in a park in Cincinnati, stands not on the tall classical pedestal commonly used for public 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* (see page 39) stands tip-toe 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.

Notice, too, that some sculpture does not have a base. George Segal's *The Diner* (page 81) is an example of what has come to be called “environmental sculpture,” an image or images placed within a specific location. Talking about his own work, Segal said: “What was considered revolutionary about it was taking sculpture off the old plywood box and making it the

center of a specifically constructed installation.” Similarly, Richard Serra has said that getting rid of the pedestal was “the biggest move of the century.” For a sculpture without a pedestal, see the work by Eva Hesse (page 83).

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? Keep in mind, too, the effect of the location of the work; a freestanding sculpture placed in the middle of a room may seem more active than a sculpture placed against a wall.

How close do you want to get? Why?



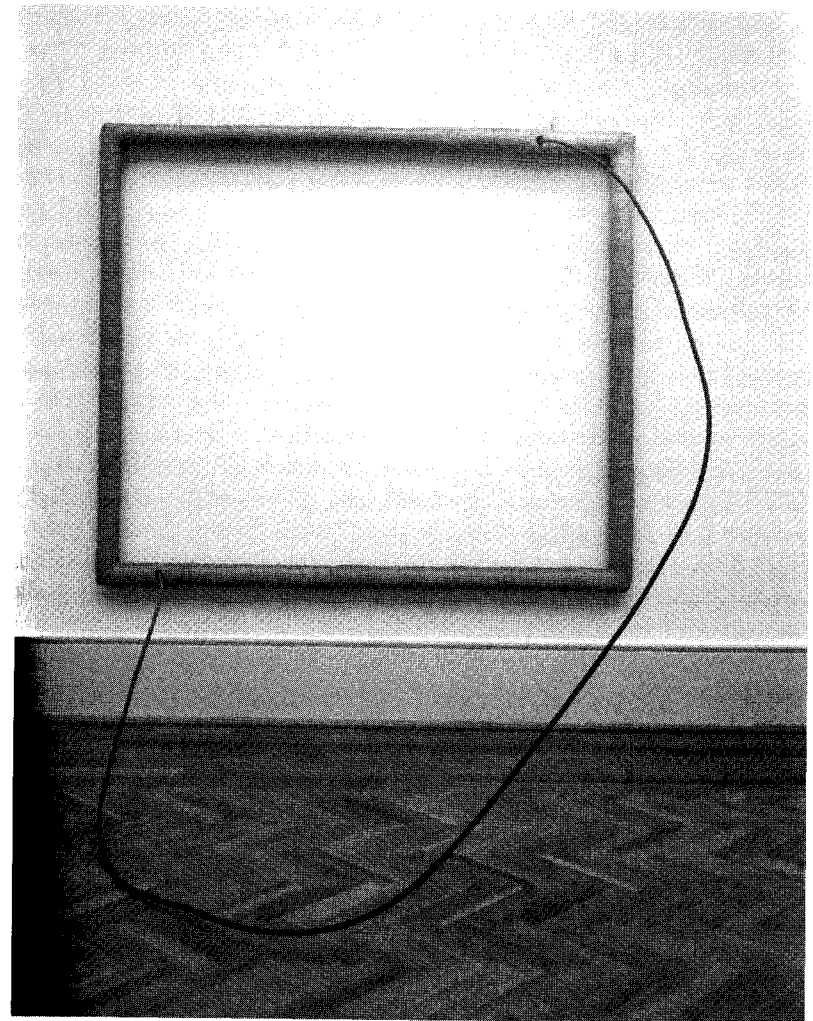
George Segal, *The Diner*.
1964–1966. Plaster, wood, chrome,
laminated plastic, masonite,
fluorescent lamp, glass, paper.
9 3/4 × 144 1/2 × 96 inches. Collection
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.
Gift of the T. B. Walker
Foundation, 1966. Art (c) The
George and Helen Segal
Foundation / Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY.

*Many older works of sculpture were placed relatively high, for example in temples and cathedrals. Sometimes the sculptors took account of this placement, elongating the torsos and enlarging the heads so that the figures look “natural” when seen from below. If such a sculpture is placed at eye level, it may seem ineptly carved.

A Note on Nonobjective or Nonrepresentational Sculpture. Until the twentieth century, sculpture used traditional materials—chiefly stone, wood, and clay—and was representational, imitating human beings or animals by means of masses of material. Sometimes the masses were created by cutting away (as in stone and wooden sculpture), sometimes they were created by adding on (as in clay sculpture, which then might serve as a model for a work cast in bronze), but in both cases the end result was a representation.

Twentieth-century sculpture, however, is of a different sort. For one thing, it is often made out of industrial products—Plexiglas, celluloid, fluorescent lights, cardboard, brushed aluminum, galvanized steel, wire, and so forth—rather than made out of traditional materials, notably wood, stone, clay, and bronze. Second, instead of representing human beings or animals or perhaps ideals such as peace or war or death (ideals that in the past were often represented allegorically through images of figures), much twentieth-century sculpture is concerned with creating spaces. Instead of cutting away (carving) or building up (modeling) material to create representational masses, the sculptors join material (**assemblage**) to explore spaces or movement in space. Unlike traditional sculpture, which is usually mounted on a pedestal, announcing that it is a work of art, something to be contemplated as a thing apart from us, the more recent works we are now talking about may rest directly on the floor or ground, as part of the environment in which we move, or they may project from a wall or be suspended by a wire.

Let's look at a nonrepresentational work, Eva Hesse's *Hang-Up* (1966), shown on page 83. Hesse, who died of a brain tumor in 1970 at the age of thirty-four, began as a painter but then turned to sculpture, and it is for her work as a sculptor that she is most highly regarded. Her materials were not those of traditional sculpture; Hesse used string, balloons, wire, latex-coated cloth, rubber tubing, and other “nonart” materials to create works that (in her words) seem “silly” and “absurd.” Only occasionally did Hesse create the sense of mass and sturdiness common in traditional sculpture; usually, as in *Hang-Up*, she creates a sense that fragile things have been put together, assembled only temporarily. In *Hang-Up*, a wooden frame is wrapped with bedsheets, and a half-inch metal tube, wrapped with cord, sweeps out (or straggles out) from the upper left and into the viewer's space, and then returns to the frame at the lower right. The whole, painted in varying shades of gray, has an ethereal look.



Eva Hesse, American, b. Germany, 1936–1970. *Hang Up*. 1966. Acrylic on cord and cloth, wood, and steel, 182.9 × 213.4 × 198.1 cm. Through prior gifts of Arthur Keating and Mr. and Mrs. Edward Morris, 1988.130. Photograph © 1999, The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.

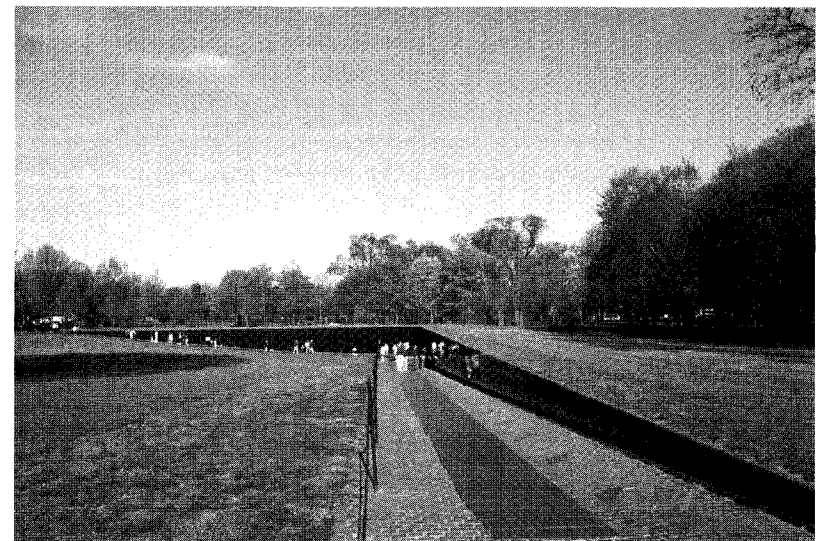
Taking a cue from Hesse, who in an interview with Cindy Nemser in *Artforum* (May 1970) said that she tried “to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites” and that she wanted to “take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small,” we can see an evident opposition in the rigid, rectangular frame and the sprawling wire. There are also oppositions between the hard frame and its cloth wrapping or bandaging, and between the metal tubing and its cord wrapping. Further, there is an opposition or contradiction in a frame that hangs on a wall but that contains no picture. In fact, a viewer at first wonders if the frame *does* contain a panel painted the same color as the wall, and so the mind is stimulated by thoughts of illusion and reality. And although the work does not obviously represent any form found in the real world, the bandaging, the tubing, and perhaps our knowledge of Hesse’s illness, may put us in mind of the world of hospitals, of bodies in pain. (The materials that Hesse commonly used, such as latex and fiberglass, often suggest the feel and color of flesh.) In *Hang-Up*, the tube, connected at each end to opposite extremes of the swathed frame, may suggest a life-support system.

The title, too, provides a clue; *Hang-Up* literally hangs on a wall, but the title glances also at psychological difficulties—anyone’s, but especially those of the artist, who was experiencing a difficult marriage and who was trying to create a new form of sculpture. If we go back to the idea of oppositions, we can say that the work itself has a hang-up: It seems as though it wants to be a painting (the frame), but the painting never materialized and now the work is a sculpture.

In looking at nonobjective sculpture, consider the following:

- the scale (e.g., is it massive, or is it on a domestic scale, like *Hang-Up*?)
- the effects of the materials (e.g., soft or hard, bright or dull?)
- the relationships between the parts (e.g., is the emphasis on masses or on planes, on closed volumes or on open assembly? If the work is an assembly, are light materials lightly put together, or are massive materials industrially joined?)
- the site (e.g., if the work is in a museum, does it hang on a wall or does it rest without a pedestal on the floor? If it is in the open, what does the site do to the work, and what does the work do to the site?)
- the title (e.g., is the title playful? enigmatic? significant?)
- comments by the sculptor, such as may be found in the four collections of statements by artists, mentioned on page 74.

Let’s consider a bit further this matter of nonrepresentational sculpture, paying attention now to public **memorials**. Think of a traditional war memorial—for instance, a statue of a local general in a park, or the Iwo Jima Monument representing marines raising an American flag—and then compare such a work with Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, dedicated in 1982 (see this page). Lin’s pair of 200-foot granite walls join to make a wide V, embracing a gently sloping plot of ground. On the walls, which rise from ground level to a height of about 10 feet at the vertex, are inscribed the names of the 57,939 Americans who died in the Vietnam War—not in alphabetic sequence but in the sequence in which they died. The wall thus offers a sort of chronological narrative of the war. As visitors descend the slope to approach the wall with the names of the dead—a sort of descent into the grave—they experience a powerful sense of mortality, a sense heightened by the fact that visitors see their own reflection in the polished walls that list the dead. Because this monument did not seem in any evident way to memorialize the heroism of those who died in the war, it stirred a great deal of controversy, and finally, as a concession to



Maya Lin, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1980–1982, walkway. Washington, D.C., January 20, 1997. Black granite. Each wall 10' 1" x 246' 9". Photographer: James P. Blair/Corbis/Bettmann.

veterans groups, the Federal Fine Arts Commission came up with a compromise: A bronze sculpture of three larger-than-life armed soldiers (done by Frederick Hart) was placed nearby, thereby celebrating wartime heroism in a traditional way.

Although Lin's environmental sculpture has been interpreted as representational—the V-shaped walls have been seen as representing the chevron of the foot soldier, or as the antiwar sign of a V made with the fingers—clearly these interpretations are far-fetched. The memorial is not an object representing anything, nor is it an object that (set aside from the real world and showing the touch of the artist's hand) is meant to be looked at as a work of art, in the way that we look at a sculpture on a pedestal or at a picture in a frame. Rather, it is a *site*, a place for contemplation.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial belongs to a broad class of sculptures called *primary forms*. These are massive constructions, often designed in accordance with mathematical equations and often made by industrial fabricators. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (see page 5) is another example, though it is made of earth and rocks rather than of industrial materials. The spiral, an archetypal form found in all cultures, is sometimes interpreted as suggesting an inward journey (the discovery of the self or the return to one's origins) or an outward journey into the cosmos.

In looking at a monument (also called a memorial), consider the following:

- Who is represented? What is remembered in the memorial?
- Is it representational, like the Lincoln Memorial and the Statue of Liberty, or is it nonrepresentational, like the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*? If nonrepresentational, is it symbolic? Of what? And how do the elements convey the symbolic meaning? (Color? Scale? Material? Does—for instance—marble imply endurance, or does flowing water imply the passage of time? Does a reflecting pool implicate the viewer? Do trees imply renewed life?)
- Does the monument include any relics? (In New York City, the *Maine Monument*, dedicated to the ship that exploded in Havana Harbor in 1898, includes a tablet cast in metal recovered from the destroyed ship.)
- Does the location of the monument contribute to its meaning?
- Does the monument include words? (The Lincoln Memorial includes texts by Lincoln.) If words are present, do they seem integral or merely tacked on?

- Has the monument been altered in any way, thereby reflecting a change in public taste? The Custer National Battlefield in 1991 was renamed the Little Bighorn National Battlefield. The original monument consisted of an obelisk dedicated to the memory of Lieutenant General Custer and the 270 soldiers and the Crow Indian scouts of the 7th Cavalry who in 1876 were killed by Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. The revised monument includes an Indian Memorial, dedicated to all the Indians who fought, on either side, to preserve their land and their culture. An earthen enclosure is marked with a cut or a "weeping wound"; two large posts flank the gap, forming a "spirit gate" that welcomes all of the dead, who now possess the wisdom they did not have when alive.
- Is the monument intended merely to be looked at from a distance, or is the visitor invited to establish some sort of closer relationship, for instance, by entering it?
- What is the name of the monument? Consider again the change from Custer National Battlefield to Little Bighorn National Battlefield. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Park, by using "park" instead of "monument" or "memorial," puts the emphasis on Kennedy as a living force.
- Is the monument aesthetically pleasing?
- Is it intellectually stimulating?

Architecture

You may recall from Chapter 1 (page 11) Auden's comment that a critic can "throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, religion, etc." Works of architecture, because they are created for use, especially can be considered in the context of the society that produced them. As the architect Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) said, "Once you learn to look upon architecture not merely as an art, more or less well or badly done, but as a social manifestation, the critical eye becomes clairvoyant, and obscure, unnoted phenomena become illumined."

The Roman architect Vitruvius suggested that buildings can be judged according to their

- *utilitas* (function, fitness for their purpose, utility)
- *firmitas* (firmness, structural soundness)
- *venustas* (beauty, design)

Utilitas gets us thinking about how suitable (convenient, usable) the building is for its purposes. Does the building work, as (say) a bank, a church, a residence, a school? *Firmitas* gets us thinking about the structure and the durability of the materials in a given climate. *Venustas* gets us thinking about the degree to which it offers delight. Much (though not all) of what follows is an amplification of these three topics.

What did the client want? What was or is the **purpose** of the building? For instance, does it provide a residence for a ruler, a place of worship, or a place for legislators to assemble? Was this also its original purpose? If not, what was the building originally used for? Consider Le Corbusier's maxim, "A house is a machine for living in" (*Une maison est une machine-à-habiter*). All architecture is designed to help us to live—even a tomb is designed to help the living to cope with death, perhaps by assuring them that the deceased lives in memory. Churches, museums, theaters, banks, zoos, schools, garages, residences, all are designed to facilitate the business of living.

Does the building appear today as it did when constructed? Has it been added to, renovated, restored, or otherwise changed in form?

What does the building say? "All architecture," wrote John Ruskin, "proposes an effect on the human mind, not merely a service to the human frame." One can distinguish between function as housing and function as getting across the patron's message—or the architect's. In Frank Lloyd Wright's formula, "Architecture is the scientific art of making structure express ideas." Sometimes the idea conveyed by the structure is grotesquely obvious as, for instance, when a frankfurter eatery is shaped like a frankfurter or a seafood restaurant is shaped like a ship or a fish, but sometimes the relationship between structure and idea is more profound. A Gothic cathedral such as Chartres said by virtue of its cross shape that it was a house of Jesus, and by virtue of the light coming through stained glass windows with their holy images that it was a house of God (the Gospel according to John describes Jesus as the Light of the World) and the image Heaven. A nineteenth-century bank said, by means of its bulk, its bronze doors, and its barred windows, that your money was safe; it also said, since it had the façade of a Greek temple, that money was holy. A modern bank, full of glass and color, is more likely to say that money is fun. Some older libraries look like Romanesque churches, and the massive J. Edgar Hoover FBI building in Washington, D.C., with its masses of precast concrete, looks like a fortress, uninviting, menacing, impregnable—the very image of the FBI.

What, then, are the architectural traditions behind the building that contribute to the building's expressiveness? The Boston City Hall (see page 92), for all its modernity and (in its lower part) energetic vitality, is tied together in its upper stories by forceful bands of windows, similar in their effect to a classical building with columns. (Classical façades, with columns, pediments, and arches, are by no means out of date. One can see versions of them, often slightly jazzed up, as the entrances to malls and high-style retail shops that wish to suggest that their goods are both timeless and in excellent taste.)

Here is how Eugene J. Johnson sees (or hears) Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building (1954–1957):

Austere, impersonal, and lavishly bronzed, it sums up the power, personality, and wealth of the modern corporation, whose public philanthropy is symbolized by the piazza in front, with its paired fountains—private land donated to the urban populace. If the piazza and twin fountains call to mind the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, so be it, particularly when one looks out from the Seagram lobby across an open space to the Renaissance-revival façade of McKim, Mead and White's Racquet Club which quotes the garden façade of Palazzo Farnese! Mies set up a brilliant conversation between two classicizing buildings, bringing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries together without compromise on either part. Mies was in many ways *the* great classicist of this century. One might say that one of his major successes lay in fusing the principles of the great classical tradition of Western architecture with the raw technology of the modern age.

—"United States of America," in *International Handbook of Contemporary Developments in Architecture*, ed. Warren Sanderson (1981), 506

Notice how Johnson fuses *description* (e.g., "lavishly bronzed") with interpretive *analysis* (he sees in the bronze the suggestion of corporate power). Notice, too, how he connects the building with history (the debt of the piazza and twin fountains to the Palazzo Farnese) and how he connects it with its site (the "conversation" with a nearby building).

We have already seen (pages 29–31) that, like other buildings, **museums and the exhibition spaces** within museums make statements. This is true whether the museum resembles a Greek temple and is entered only after a heavenward ascent up a great flight of steps, or whether it is a Renaissance palace or a modern imitation of one, or whether it is insistently high-tech. When the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York in 1939, with an entrance consisting of a revolving

door on ground level, it was making the radical statement that an art museum was more like a department store than it was like a temple.

In thinking about an exhibition it is usually worth asking oneself what sorts of statements the museum and the exhibition space make. Think about why the material is being presented (consider the difference between titling an exhibition “Festival of Indonesia” and “100 Masterpieces from Indonesia”) and why it is presented in this particular way. For instance, is the material presented with abundant verbal information on the walls, perhaps thereby emphasizing the cultural context, or with minimal labels and lots of empty space on the walls, perhaps thereby emphasizing the formal properties and the aesthetic values of each work? A number of recent museums, seeking to gain publicity of the sort gained by Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (page 93), are conceived as enormous sculptures, but their high ceilings and vast irregular rooms (sometimes with curved walls that do not meet the floor at right angles) are not always well suited to displaying traditional small works of art.*

Do the forms and materials of the building relate to its neighborhood? What does the building contribute to the **site**? What does the site contribute to the building? Does the building contrast with the site or complement it? How big is the building in relation to the neighborhood and in relation to human beings; that is, what is the **scale**? A building larger than its neighbors, or elevated above them by a platform, suggests it is of greater importance. The Cambridge City Hall (1889); (see page 91), atop a slope above the street, crowns the site and announces—especially because it is in a Romanesque style—that it is a bastion of order, even of piety, giving moral significance to the neighborhood below. The Boston City Hall (1968; page 92), its lower part in brick, rises out of a brick plaza—the plaza flows into spaces between the concrete pillars that support the building—and seems to invite the crowds from the neighboring shops, outdoor cafés, and marketplace to come in for a look at government of the people by the people, and yet at the same time the building announces its importance.

How do you **approach** the building, and how do you enter it?

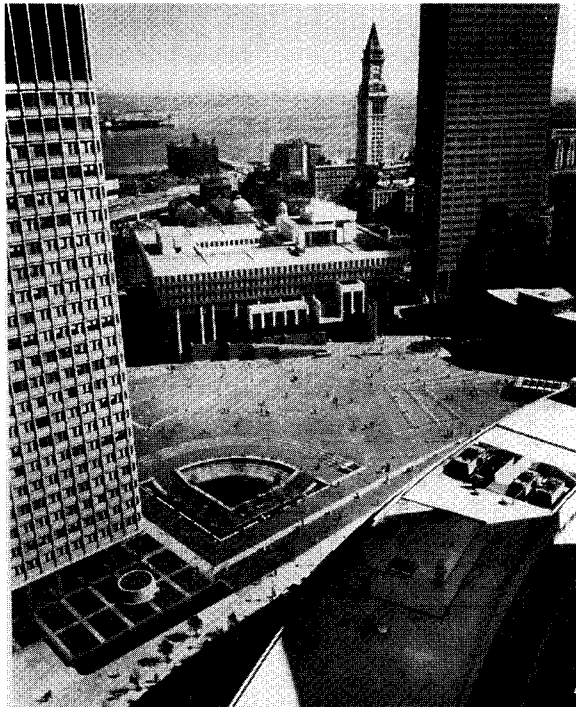
Does **form** follow **function**? For better or for worse? For example, does the function of a room determine its shape? Are there rooms

*For an examination of many museums built in recent decades, see Victoria Newhouse, *Toward the New Museum*, 1998. Among the topics Newhouse considers are “The Museum as Sacred Space,” “The Museum as Entertainment,” and “The Museum as Environmental Art.”



Cambridge City Hall, Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass. c. 1910. Longfellow, Alden, & Harlow Architects. Photograph by Thomson & Thomson. Courtesy of Historic New England. (HNE negative #7526-B).

with geometric shapes irrelevant to their purposes? Louis Sullivan, in rejecting the nineteenth-century emphasis on architecture as a matter of style (in its most extreme form, a matter of superficial decoration), said, “Form ever follows function.” Sullivan’s comment, with its emphasis on structural integrity—the appearance of a building was to reveal the nature of its construction as well as the nature of its functions or uses—became the slogan for many architects working in the mid-twentieth century. But there were other views. For instance, Philip Johnson countered Sullivan with “form always follows forms and not function.” In looking at a building, ask yourself if the form serves a **symbolic function**; recall the “lavishly bronzed” Seagram building,



Boston City Hall,
City Hall Plaza
Center, 1961–1968.
Photographer: Cervin
Robinson. In
Architecture Boston.
(Boston Society of
Architects, 1976).

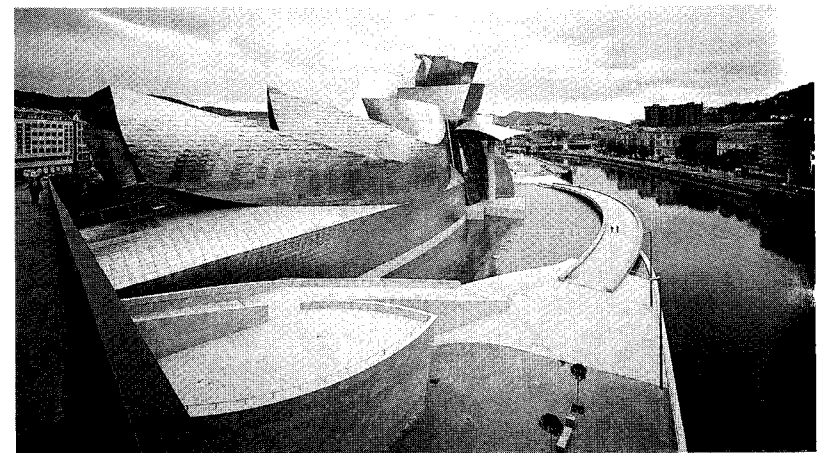
which Eugene J. Johnson sees as summing up “the power, personality, and wealth of the modern corporation.” Equally symbolic or expressive is Eero Saarinen’s Trans World Airlines Terminal at Kennedy Airport, where the two outstretched wings suggest flight. Consider, too, Frank Gehry’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1997) in Bilbao, built by the side of a river in a Basque port city in northern Spain, whose economy was based on shipbuilding. Viewed from across the river, the titanium-sheathed design evokes a ship, expressing such ideas as the history of the city, grandeur, and elegance.

What **materials** are used? How do the materials contribute to the building’s purpose and statement? The Bilbao Guggenheim, (see page 93) in addition to using titanium (a material chiefly used in aeronautics), uses a pale Spanish limestone that is evident in Bilbao’s old university across the river, and so in its materials the museum embraces the past as well as the present. Or, as another example, take the materials of some American college and university buildings. Adobe may work well at the

University of New Mexico, but would it be right for the Air Force Academy in Colorado? (The Academy uses different materials—notably aluminum, steel, and glass.) Brick buildings in Collegiate Georgian (an imitation of eighteenth-century architecture) suggest a connection with the nation’s earliest colleges; stone buildings in Collegiate Gothic (pointed arches and narrow windows), common around 1900, are supposed to suggest a preindustrial world of spirituality and scholarship.

Each building material has associations or, at least, potential associations

- **Marble:** The Sam Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., is clad in marble veneer (costing many millions of dollars) because marble is thought to suggest dignity and permanence—though in fact marble is a rather soft stone. Marble is highly versatile: White or black marble, common in expensive jewelry shops, can seem sleek or aloof; pink or creamy marble, in a boutique with goods for women, can seem soft and warm.
- **Brick** often suggests warmth or unpretentiousness and hand-craftsmanship.
- **Wood**, like marble, is amazingly versatile. In its rough-bark state it suggests the great outdoors; trimmed and painted it can be the



Frank Gehry, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997, Bilbao. Exterior view. The titanium-sheathed design evokes a ship, an apt form for a building in a city whose economy was largely based on shipbuilding and steel. Photographer: David Heald. © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

clapboard and shingles of an earlier America; smooth and sleek and unpainted it can suggest Japanese elegance.

- **Glass** can be transparent, translucent, or even opaque, as in I. M. Pei's John Hancock Building in Boston. The exterior walls of the Hancock building reflect the sky and clouds, thereby animating and softening the building, which towers above its neighbors.

Do the **exterior walls** seem hard or soft, cold or warm? Is the sense of hardness or coldness appropriate? (Don't simply assume that metal must look cold. A metal surface that reflects images can be bright, lively, and playful. Curves and arches of metal can seem warm and "soft.") Does the material in the interior have affinities with that of the exterior? If so, for better or for worse? (Our experience of an interior brick wall may be very different from our experience of an exterior brick wall.)

Does the **exterior** stand as a massive sculpture, masking the spaces and the activities within, or does it express them? The exterior of the Boston City Hall (see page 92) emphatically announces that the building harbors a variety of activities; in addition to containing offices, it contains conference rooms, meeting halls, an exhibition gallery, a reference library, and other facilities. Are the spaces continuous? Or are they static, each volume capped with its own roof?

What is the function of **ornament** or of any **architectural statuary** in or near the building? To embellish a surface? (At Cornell University, the John Henrik Clarke Africana Library is clad in multicolor brick in patterns suggestive of African textiles.) To conceal the joins of a surface? To emphasize importance? (The east end of a Christian church, where the altar is, sometimes is more elaborately decorated than the rest of the building.)

Does the interior arrangement of spaces say something—for example, is the mayor's office in the city hall on the top floor, indicating that he or she is above such humdrum activities as dog licensing, which is on the first floor?

In a given room, what is the function of the walls? To support the ceiling or the roof? To afford privacy and protection from weather? To provide a surface on which to hang shelves, blackboards, pictures? If glass, to provide a view in—or out?

What is the effect of the floor (wood, tile, brick, marble, carpet)? Notice especially the effect if you move from a room floored with one material (say, wood) to another (say, carpet).

Is the building inviting? The architect Louis Kahn said, "A building should be a . . . stable and *harboring* thing. If you can now [with structural steel] put columns as much as 100 feet apart you may lose more than you gain because the sense of enclosed space disappears." Is the public invited? The Cambridge City Hall has one public entrance, approached by a flight of steps; the Boston City Hall, its lower floor paved with the brick of the plaza, has many entrances at ground level. What are the implications in this difference?

"There is no excellent Beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion," said Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century. Does the building evoke and then satisfy a sense of curiosity?

What is the role of **color**? To clarify form? To give sensuous pleasure? To symbolize meaning? (Something has already been said, on page 93, about the effects of the colors of marble.) Much of the criticism of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* centered on the color of the stone walls. One critic, asserting that "black is the universal color of shame [and] sorrow," called for a white memorial.

What part does the changing **daylight** play in the appearance of the exterior of the building? Does the interior make interesting use of natural light? And how light is the interior? (The Lincoln Memorial, open only at the front, is somber within, but the Jefferson Memorial, admitting light from all sides, is airy and suggestive of Jefferson's rational—sunny, we might say—view of life. Similarly, the light in places of worship differs. A New England colonial church, with lots of clear windows and white walls, is full of light; a neo-Gothic cathedral, with narrow stained glass windows and dark woodwork, is subdued, mysterious, perhaps in some minds gloomy.)

As the preceding discussion suggests, architectural criticism usually is based on three topics:

- the building or monument as an envelope (its purpose, structural system, materials, sources of design, history, design [articulation of the façade, including the arrangement of the windows and doors, ornamentation, color])
- the interior (hierarchy of spaces, flow of traffic, connection with the exterior)
- the site (relationship of the building to the environment)

A fourth topic is

- the architect's philosophy and the place of the building in the history of the architect's work

If you are writing about the first or second of these topics—the building as an envelope or the enclosed spaces through which one moves—you may have only your eyes and legs to guide you when you study the building of your choice, say, a local church or a college building. But if the building is of considerable historical or aesthetic interest, you may be able to find a published *plan* (a scale drawing of a floor, showing the arrangement of the spaces) or an *elevation* (a scale drawing of an external or internal wall). Plans and elevations, often available in printed sources, are immensely useful as aids in understanding buildings. For a helpful introductory discussion of architecture that makes excellent use of plans and elevations, see Simon Unwin, *Analyzing Architecture* (1997).

A few words about the organization of an essay on a building may be useful. Much will depend on your purpose and on the building, but consider the possibility of using one of these three methods of organization:

1. You might discuss, in this order, *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*—that is, function, structure, and design (see page 87–88).
2. You might begin with a view of the building as seen at a considerable distance, then at a closer view, and then go on to work from the ground up, since the building supports itself this way.
3. You might take, in this order, these topics:
 - the materials (smooth or rough, light or dark, and so on)
 - the general form, perceived as one walks around the building (e.g., are the shapes square, rectangular, or circular, or what? Are they simple or complex?)
 - the façades, beginning with the entrance (e.g., is the entrance dominant or recessive? How is each façade organized? Is there variety or regularity among the parts?)
 - the relation to the site, including materials and scale

Cautionary Words about Slides and Reproductions in Books and on the World Wide Web

Drawings and Paintings The colors of slides, reproductions in books, and images on the World Wide Web range from pretty accurate to very poor.

- Even if the color is good, reproductions give little if any sense of the texture and scale of the original drawing or painting. They lose, for instance, the texture of the paper of a drawing or the three-dimensionality and juiciness of thickly applied oil paint.
- Photographs give no sense of the scale of the original. A life-size portrait makes an effect utterly different from a miniature, and standing in front of a Japanese screen that is 5½ H feet tall and 12 feet long differs from looking at a reproduction 5½ inches tall and 12 inches long.
- Frames, even when they are designed by the painter, are rarely reproduced in textbooks or catalogs.

If possible, therefore, write only about works that you have actually seen—works that you have actually experienced by standing in their presence. If you can't see the original, ask your instructor to recommend the books or Web sites with the best reproductions of the works that you are writing about, but even with good reproductions the sense of scale is lost.

Sculpture Photographs of works of sculpture are an enormous aid; we can see details of a work that, even if we were in its presence, might be invisible because the work is high above us on a wall or because it is shrouded in darkness. The sculptural programs on medieval buildings, barely visible *in situ*, can be analyzed (e.g., for their iconography and their style) by means of photographs. But keep in mind the following points:

- Because a photograph is two-dimensional, it gives little sense of a sculpture in the round. Fortunately, some Web sites do offer 360-degree panoramas of sculpture.
- A photograph may omit or falsify color, and it may obliterate distinctive textures.
- The photographer's lighting may produce dramatic highlights or contrasts, or it may (by even lighting) eliminate highlights that would normally be evident. Further, a bust (say, a Greek head in a museum) when photographed against a dark background may seem to float mysteriously, creating an effect very different from the rather dry image of the same bust photographed, with its mount visible, against a light gray background. In short, photographs of sculpture are highly interpretative.
- A photograph of a work even in its original context (to say nothing of a photograph of a work in a museum) may decontextualize

the work, for example, by not taking account of the angle from which the work was supposed to be seen. The first viewers of Michelangelo's *Moses* had to look upward to see the image, but almost all photographs in books show it taken straight on. Similarly, a photo of Daniel Chester French's *Lincoln* can convey almost nothing of the experience of encountering the work as one mounts the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

- Generally, photographs do not afford a sense of scale (relative size); for example, one may see Michelangelo's *David* (about 13 feet tall) as no bigger than a toy soldier, unless the photograph includes human viewers.

Architecture We have talked about architecture in terms of *utilitas* (function, fitness for purpose), *firmitas* (firmness), and *venustas* (beauty). Of these aspects, photographs—invaluable in their way—chiefly reveal only the third.

- Photographs tell us something about what the façades look like, but they tell us little or nothing about how well a building functions and little or nothing about how well it is built.
- Photographs rarely tell us how the building relates visually to its neighbors. (Eugene J. Johnson could not have said what he says on page 89 about the Seagram building if he had been working only from a photograph.)
- Human beings are rarely shown in architectural photographs, especially in photographs of interiors, which are likely to be neatly composed pictures rather than images of lived-in spaces. And without people, it is hard to sense the scale of the rooms.

In short, though for some purposes photographs of buildings are indispensable, try to write about buildings that you have visited. If you must rely on photographs, try to imagine yourself moving within the building. Remember, architecture is not a large sculpture, an object that one looks at; rather, it is a distinct place, a space in which one moves.

Photography

A *photograph* is literally an image “written by light.” Although most people today think of a photograph as a flat work on paper produced from a *negative* (in which tones or colors are the opposite from what we

normally see) made in a camera, none of these qualities is necessary.* Photographs can be made without cameras (by exposing a light-sensitive material directly to light), can be generated without negatives (color slides and Polaroid prints are familiar examples of what are known as *direct positives*), and can be pieces of fabric, leather, glass, metal, or even a still image on a computer screen. All that you need to have a photograph is a substance that changes its color or tone under the influence of light and that can subsequently be made insensitive to light so that it can be viewed.

Inherent in this requirement that the image be created by light is the fundamental distinction between photography and prior ways of making pictures. Instead of having the hand drag oil paint across a stretched piece of linen or incise lines into a metal plate to generate an engraving, nature itself, with the help of some manufactured lenses and chemically coated sheets of glass, paper, or film, became the artist. Early photographic viewers marveled at the seemingly limitless details that magically appeared on the metal plate used for one of the first processes, the *daguerreotype*. Thus was born the idea that the camera cannot lie and that the image it produced depended on chemistry and optics, not on human skills.

At the same time, photographers and critics who were familiar with the craft realized that there was a huge gap between what the eye saw and the finished photograph. Human beings have two eyes that are constantly moving to track forms across and into space; they perceive through time, not in fixed units; their angle of vision (the horizontal span perceived when holding the eye immobile) is not necessarily that of a lens; their eyes adjust rapidly to read objects in both bright sun and deep shadows. As Joel Snyder and Neil Allen observed in *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1975), “A photograph shows us ‘what we would have seen’ at a certain moment in time, *from* a certain vantage point *if* we kept our head immobile *and* closed one eye *and* *if* we saw with the equivalent of a 150-mm or 24-mm lens *and* *if* we saw things in Agfacolor or in Tri-X developed in D-76 and printed on Kodabromide #3 paper” (page 152). And, they point out, if the eye and the camera saw the world in the same way, then the world would look the way it does in photographs.

*This discussion of photography is by Elizabeth Anne McCauley (Princeton University), author of numerous studies of the history of photography, including *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

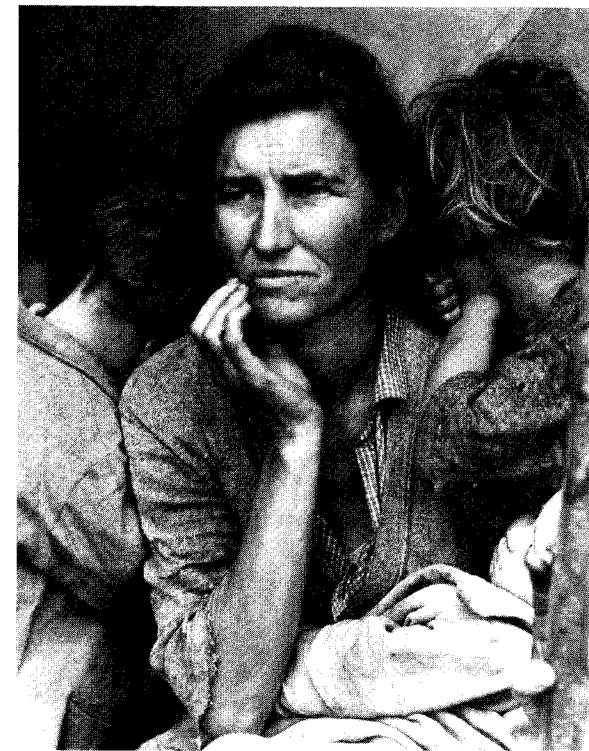
Photographers also intervene in every step of the photographic process. They pose sitters; select the time of day or artificial light source; pick the camera, film, exposure time, and amount of light allowed to enter the camera (the lens *aperture*); position the camera at a certain height or distance from the subject; focus on a given plane or area; develop the film to bring out certain features; choose the printing paper and manipulate the print during enlargement and development; and so forth. By controlling the world in front of the camera, the environment within the camera, and the various procedures after the light-sensitive material's initial exposure to light, the photographer may attempt to communicate a personal interpretation or vision of the world. If he or she succeeds, we may begin to talk about a photographic "style" that may be perceptible in many images made over several years.

Since its invention in the early nineteenth century, photography has taken over many of the functions of the traditional pictorial arts while satisfying new functions, such as selling products or recording events as they actually happen. Because early photography seemed close to observed reality, it was rapidly used any time factual truth was required. Photographs have been taken of ancient and modern architecture, engineering feats, criminals' faces, biological specimens, astronomical phenomena, artworks, slum conditions, and just about anything that needed to be classified, studied, regulated, or commemorated. Because the validity of these images depended on their acceptance as truth, their creators often downplayed their role in constructing the photographs. The photojournalist Robert Capa, talking about his famous views of the Spanish Civil War, said, "No tricks are necessary to take pictures in Spain. . . . The pictures are there, and you just take them. The truth is the best picture, the best propaganda."

While statements such as Capa's reveal what photographers once wanted the public to believe about their images, we now no longer accept photographs, even so-called documentary ones, as unmanipulated truth. All photographs are representations, in that they tell us as much about the photographer, the technology used to produce the image, and their intended uses as they tell us about the events or things depicted. In some news photographs, we now know that the event shown was in part staged. For example, the British photographer Roger Fenton, who was one of the first cameramen to record a war, moved the cannonballs that litter the blasted landscape in his famous *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, a photograph taken in 1855 during the Crimean War. Does this make a difference when we look at the picture as evidence of how a battleground

appeared? Perhaps not. But we should be careful about ever assuming that from photographic evidence we can always draw valid conclusions about the lives of people, the historical meaning of events, and the possible actions that we should take.

Let's look now at a photograph (shown here) by Dorothea Lange, an American photographer who made her reputation with photographs of migrant farmers in California during the Depression that began in 1929. Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (1936) is probably the best-known image of the period. A student made the following entry in a journal in which he regularly jotted down his thoughts about the material in



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. February 1936. Gelatin-silver print, 12 1/2" × 9 7/8". Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

an art course he was taking. (The student was given no information about the photograph other than its title and date.)

This woman seems to be thinking. In a way, the picture reminds me of a statue called *The Thinker*, of a seated man who is bent over, with his chin resting on his hand. But I wouldn't say that this photograph is really so much about thinking as it is about other things. I'd say that it is about several other things. First (but not really in any particular order), fear. The children must be afraid, since they have turned to their mother. Second, the picture is about love. The children press against their mother, sure of her love. The mother does not actually show her love—for instance, by kissing them, or even hugging them—but you feel she loves them. Third, the picture is about hopelessness. The mother doesn't seem to be able to offer any comfort. Probably they have very little food; maybe they are homeless. I'd say the picture is also about courage. Although the picture seems to me to show hopelessness, I also think the mother, even though she does not know how she will be able to help her children, shows great strength in her face. She also has a lot of dignity. She hasn't broken down in front of the children; she is going to do her best to get through the day and the next day and the next.

Another student wrote:

Is this picture sentimental? I remember from American Lit that good literature is not sentimental. (When we discussed the word, we concluded that "sentimental" meant "sickeningly sweet.") Some people might think that Lange's picture, showing a mother and three little children, is sentimental, but I don't think so. Although the children must be upset, and maybe they even are crying, the mother seems to be very strong. I feel that with a mother like this, the children are in very good hands. She is not "sickeningly sweet." She may be almost overcome with despair, but she doesn't seem to ask us to pity her.

A third student wrote:

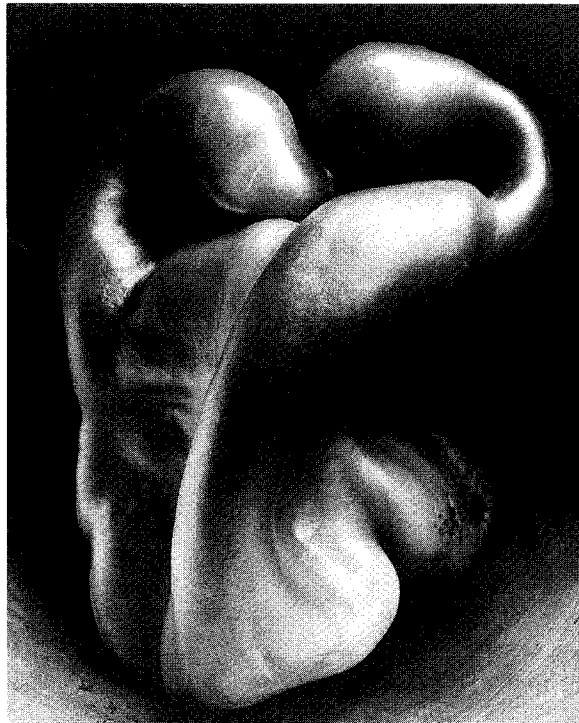
Why does this picture bother me? It's like those pictures of the homeless in the newspapers and on TV. A photographer sees some man sleeping in a cardboard box, or a woman with shopping bags sitting in a doorway, and he takes their picture. I suppose the photographer could say that he is calling the public's attention to "the plight of the homeless," but I'm not convinced that he's doing anything more than making money by selling photographs.

Homeless people have almost no privacy, and then some photographer comes along and invades even their doorways and cardboard houses. Sometimes the people are sleeping, or even if they are awake they may be in so much despair that they don't bother to tell the photographer to get lost. Or they may be mentally ill and don't know what's happening. In the case of this picture, the woman is not asleep, but she seems so preoccupied that she isn't aware of the photographer. Maybe she has just been told there is no work for her, or maybe she has been told she can't stay if she keeps the children. Should the photographer have intruded on this woman's sorrow? This picture may be art, but it bothers me.

All of these entries are thoughtful, interesting, and helpful—material that can be the basis of an essay—though, of course, even taken together they do not provide the last word. Far from being a neutral document, this photograph encapsulates Lange's sympathy for displaced migrant workers and her belief that they need government assistance. As comparisons between this justly famous image and other prints Lange took at the same time reveal, only this photograph is symmetrical and contrasts the strained face of the mother with the two bedraggled but anonymous children and the almost hidden baby in her lap. Although the clothing, place, and people are real, in the sense that Lange found them in this condition, she undoubtedly encouraged this pose, which echoes traditional representations of the Madonna and child. The tow-headed but grimy children become all children; the mother, seeming to look searchingly off to her right while raising her worn hand tentatively to her chin, could be any American mother worried about her family. The most effective social document, as Lange herself would readily admit, is not necessarily the spontaneous snapshot taken without the photographer's intervention in the scene. It is the careful combination of subject matter and composition that grabs our attention and holds it.

Some photographs are more obvious in the ways that they reveal the point of view of the person behind the camera and the manipulation of observed reality. Many of these images are intended to be sold and appreciated as aesthetic documents. In other words, the formal properties of the image—its composition, shades of tone or color, quality of light, use of blurs and grain—become as important as or more important than the depicted subject in inspiring feelings or ideas in the viewer. Edward Weston's *Pepper #30* (1930), placed against a mysterious black background and softly lit from the side (page 104), makes us think of the ways

that the ever-changing curves and bulges of common vegetables repeat the sensual, intertwined limbs of the human body. By moving close to the isolated object and carefully controlling the lighting, Weston assumes an aesthetic rather than a botanical approach. The picture would not be very



Edward Weston, (American, 1886–1958). *Pepper*, 1930. Photograph, gelatin silver print. Sheet: 24.1 × 19.2 cm (9 ½ × 7 ⅞ in.). © The Lane Collection. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Weston used long time exposures for his peppers, ranging from six minutes to fifty. In an entry dated 24 April 1930 he repeated in his journal, which he called *Daybook*, a statement that he had written for a museum: “Clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smoke stacks, are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is life. —Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole.” And on 8 August 1930 he wrote, “It is a classic, completely satisfying—a pepper—but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter...this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind.”

successful as an illustration for a book on the various species of peppers and their reproductive structures; it does not present the kind of visual information that we have grown to expect from such illustrations.

In other cases, the distinctions between the artistic photograph and the documentary photograph are less clear from internal evidence. Many nineteenth-century photographs that were originally conceived as records of buildings or machinery have struck recent viewers as beautiful and expressive of a personal vision. The turn-of-the-century French photographer Eugène Atget earned his living selling standard-size prints of eighteenth-century Parisian architecture and rapidly disappearing street vendors to antiquarians, libraries, cartoonists, and illustrators. By the time of Atget's death in 1927, avant-garde artists were struck by the uncanny stillness and radiant light of many of his photographs and began collecting them as the work of a naive genius. As tastes have changed and the intended functions of photographic images have been forgotten or ignored, our understanding of photography has also shifted from the functional or documentary to the aesthetic. In writing about photographs, you should be aware of the ways that the passage of time and the changes in context transform what photographs mean. We do not respond to a framed photograph on the walls of a museum in the same way that we respond to that photograph reproduced in *Life* magazine.

At various points in the history of the medium, photographers have pointedly taken past or contemporary paintings or drawings as models for artistic photographs. They introduced Rembrandtesque lighting into portraits or contrived figure compositions imitating Raphael or Millet. In the late nineteenth century, to distinguish their works from the flood of easily made snapshots of family outings, self-proclaimed art photographers used soft focus and extensive hand manipulation of negatives and prints to make photographs that looked like charcoal drawings. These *pictorialists*, whose goal was to elevate photography to the rank of serious art by imitating the look of that art, were condemned in the early twentieth century by such photographers as Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), who argued that the best photographs were those that were honest to the unique properties of camera vision. (There was, however, little recognition that these properties were themselves changing as equipment and processes changed.)

Whereas modern photographers have rarely tried to legitimize their practice by literally copying famous paintings, they have often reintroduced manual manipulations and elaborate staging. A **manipulated photograph** is one in which either the negative or the positive (i.e., the print)

has been altered by hand or, more recently, by computer. Negatives may be scratched, drawn on, or pieced together; positive prints may be hand-tinted or have their emulsions (the coating on the paper that contains the light-sensitive material) smeared with a brush. Computer-aided processes are now often used to manipulate images. For instance, images from old magazines can be put into digital form and combined and colorized on a computer, allowing the artist, in David Hockney's words, "to work on photographs the way a draftsman might" (*Aperture*, 1992). Yasumasa Morimura, one of the most ingenious makers of manipulated pictures, uses computer technology to create composite photographs of famous paintings with images of himself—usually costumed in the appropriate period or semi-nude. Thus, for his *Portrait (Nine Faces)*, he used a computer to blend parts of his own face into the nine faces (including the face of the corpse) of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. A **fabricated photograph** is one in which the subject has been constructed or staged to be photographed. In a certain sense, all still lifes are fabricated photographs. More recently, photographers coming out of art school backgrounds have choreographed events or crafted environments to challenge our belief in photographic truth or question conventions of representation. For example, William Wegman made a jungle out of a couple of plants and turned his dog into an elephant by means of a long sock put on to the dog's snout.

Digital photography, in which light strikes an image sensor called a charge-coupled device (CCD) and is translated into a series of electronic signals, has now become the dominant mode of commercial photography and is rapidly replacing film (or "wet") photography for artists as well. Digital files can be easily manipulated using computer software such as Photoshop and printed with colored inks on various sizes of paper and other materials. There is no negative involved in digital prints and no way to prove that an image (or part of an image) was shot from life rather than made in the computer. Inkjet prints are also fugitive, and stored image files may degrade through time or become unreadable thanks to the planned obsolescence of software and hardware.

Although many people fear that digital photography undermines the very definition of the photograph as a permanent record of reality, all photographs, as we have seen, differ from human perceptions of the world. What the digital revolution has initiated, however, is an explosion in amateur photographic printing and virtually costless shooting, where errors can be deleted with the push of a button. With greater experimentation in the manufacture of digital cameras, which initially borrowed their formatting and vocabulary from film cameras ("contrast," "portrait

format," "white balance"), we can expect the next generation of digital photographic artists to explore new modes of vision as far removed from film photography as film was from drawing.

When we turn to analyze a photograph, many of the questions on drawing and painting—for example, those on composition and color—also apply. But because of the different ways that photographs are produced, their peculiar relationship to the physical world as it existed at some point in the past, and their multiple functions, we need to expand our questions to reflect these special concerns.

Our first concern in analyzing a photograph is **identification of the work** (much of this information is often provided by a wall label or photo caption). Who took the photograph? Was it an individual or a photographic firm (usually identified on the negative or in a stamp or label)? Was the positive print produced by the same individual (or firm) who exposed the negative? If the photographer is unknown, can the photograph be assigned to a country or region of production?

What is the **title** of the work? Was the photograph given a title by its creator(s) in the form of an inscription on the negative or positive? Or was the title added by later viewers? What does the title tell you about the intended function of the photograph? Did the photographer identify the **date** of the work? When was the exposure made? When was the positive print made?

What type of **photographic process** was used to produce the negative? The positive? On what sort of paper was the positive printed? Are these processes typical for the period? Why do you think the photographer chose these particular processes?

Analysis of a photographic work also involves looking at its **physical properties**. What are the dimensions of the photograph? Are these typical for the techniques chosen? What effect does the **size** of the work have on the viewer's analysis of it? Is the photograph printed on paper or on some other type of material, such as metal or silk? If the image is on paper, is the paper matte, glossy, or somewhere in between? What is the color of the print? Has it been hand-tinted or retouched? How do the physical properties of the print influence the viewer's reaction? Is the print damaged, torn, abraded, faded? Has the paper been trimmed or cropped? If the image is on metal, has there been corrosion, tarnishing, or other damage that alters your appreciation of the image? Are there signs in the print of damage to the negative?

Briefly describe the **subject** of the photograph. Is it a traditional subject—a landscape, a still life, a portrait, a genre, an allegorical or historical

scene, or a documentary? Do the figures or objects in the picture seem arranged by the photographer or caught "as they were"? Are props included? To what extent did the photographer fabricate or create the image by physically constructing, arranging, or interacting with some or all of its components? How does this affect the viewer's response?

In addition, the many **formal properties** of a photograph are relevant to an analysis. If the work is considered as a **two-dimensional** composition, how is the subject represented? Which are the most important forms and where are they located on the picture's plane? Is the composition balanced or unbalanced? How does your eye read the photograph? What did the photographer leave out of the frame? What happens along the edges of the photograph? How obvious and important is the two-dimensional composition?

If the work is considered as a **three-dimensional** composition, where is the main activity taking place—in the foreground, the midground, the background, or a combination of these areas? How did the photographer define (or not define) the three-dimensional space? How can you describe the space—as shallow or deep, static or dynamic, claustrophobic or open, rational or irrational? How important is the three-dimensional composition?

Look for the photographer's choice of **vantage point** and **angle of vision**. How near or far does the main subject appear? Does the photograph draw the viewer's attention to where the photographer was located? How does the position from which the picture was taken contribute to the mood or content of the image? What is the angle of vision? How does it compare with "normal" vision? Is there lens distortion? Why do you think the photographer chose the lens he or she did?

Examine the **detail** and **focus** of the work. Can you characterize the overall focus? Where are the areas of sharp focus? Soft focus? What is the **depth of field** (i.e., the minimum and maximum distances from the camera that are in sharp focus)? How did the photographer use focus to convey meaning? Is the image detailed or grainy? How does the detail or grain contribute to or detract from the image?

What sort of **lighting** was used? Was the photograph taken out-of-doors or inside, in natural or artificial light (or in some combination of the two)? How did the season or time of day affect the lighting conditions? Where is the main light source? The secondary light source? Was a flash used? How can you characterize the lighting—as harsh, subtle, flat, dramatic, magical, or what? What effects do you think the photographer was trying to achieve through the use or control of light?

Consider also **contrast** and **tonal range**. Within the black and white print, what is the range of light and dark? Where are the darkest and lightest areas? Does the print have high contrast, with large differences in tone from light to dark, or does it have low contrast, with many shades of gray? What overall effect do contrast and tone create?

What **exposure time** did the photographer choose? How does the length of the exposure influence the image? Do any blurs or midaction motions signal the passage of time? How does the length of the exposure add or detract from the image?

Taking into consideration the preceding points, what do you think the photographer was trying to say in this image? What aspects of the subject did the photographer want to accentuate? What was the photographer's attitude toward the subject? What does the photograph convey to you today—about a place, a time, a person, an event, or a culture?

Note: The Web site <photomuse.org> includes almost 200,000 images from the George Eastman House and the International Center of Photography.

Video Art

Video art originated in 1965, when Nam June Paik (musician, sculptor, filmmaker) used the Sony Portapak, the first portable videotape system, to record from a taxi the visit of Pope Paul VI to New York. He then showed the tapes at a New York café frequented by artists. The announcement for the screening said, "Some day artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and conductors just as they work today with brushes, violins, and junk." Video art is a medium, like oil painting or photography, not a style; the color can be intense or washed out, the images can move or be still, the recorded material can be spontaneous (as in television news coverage) or highly scripted (as in a sitcom), the work can celebrate popular culture or it can be critical of it. It uses the technology of commercial television but for purposes regarded as artistic rather than commercial. Some examples were mentioned on page 2 of this book, notably Mona Hartoum's *Corps Etranger*, a video in which Hartoum passes a fiber-optic video camera through her bodily orifices.

The monitor showing the tape may itself be part of a larger work, in which case the whole can be considered a sculpture. Thus, Paik's *Electronic Superhighway* (1995), 15 feet tall and 32 feet long, uses neon to represent a map of the United States, and within what might almost be called a neon drawing are set dozens of television monitors and laser disk



Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1982. Video. Courtesy of the Holly Solomon Gallery.

images. Two other works by Paik: In *TV Buddha* (1982) the monitor records the live camera's image of the motionless head of a Buddha who appears to be contemplating his own image on the monitor; in *Video Fish* (1975), five tanks with live fish are in front of five monitors with video tapes of swimming fish. Thus, the tanks seem to be monitors and the monitors seem to be tanks, and the whole (like *TV Buddha*) stimulates the viewer to meditate on relationships between reality and representation and, indeed, to meditate on the relationships between meditation and technology.

In writing about video art, consider

- the visual impact (e.g., the work as sculpture)
- the use of sound (music, talk, or noise usually is part of the work)
- the context (Is the work shown in a museum—and if so, in one of the galleries or in the cafeteria—or on the street, or in a café? If the work is shown on a screen in your home, how does this context relate to the video?)
- the political implications (much video art satirizes bourgeois interests)
- the connections with earlier art history (e.g., with documentary film, or with surrealism)

For statements by video artists, see *Video Art: An Anthology*, edited by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (1976). For an exhibition catalog with images and useful essays, see *Video Art* (1975; no editor, but essays by David Antin and others). See also Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video* (1990), and Michael Rush, *Video Art* (2003).

Another Look at the Questions

As the preceding discussion of various kinds of art has shown, there are many ways of helping yourself to see. In short, you can stimulate responses (and understanding) by asking yourself two basic questions:

- *What is this doing?* Why is this figure here and not there? Why is the work in bronze rather than in marble? Or put it this way: What is the artist up to?
- *Why do I have this response?* Why do I find this landscape oppressive but that landscape inviting, this child sentimental but that child fascinating? That is, how did the artist manipulate the materials in order to produce the strong feelings that I experience?

The first of these questions (*What is this doing?*) requires you to identify yourself with the artist, wondering, perhaps, why the artist chose one medium over another, whether pen is better than pencil for this drawing, or watercolor better than oil paint for this painting.

Sometimes artists tell us what they are up to. Van Gogh, for example, in a letter (11 August 1888) to his brother, helps us to understand why he put a blue background behind the portrait of a blond artist: "Behind the head instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by the simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky." But remember, you cannot assume that the artist's stated intention has been fulfilled in the work itself.

The second question (*Why do I have this response?*) requires you to trust your feelings. If you are amused or repelled or unnerved or soothed, assume that your response is appropriate and follow it up—but not so rigidly that you exclude the possibility of other, even contradictory feelings. (The important complement to "Trust your feelings" is "Trust the work of art." The study of art ought to enlarge feelings, not merely confirm them.)

Almost any art history book that you come across will attempt to answer questions posed by the author. For example, in the introduction to *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1991), Elizabeth Johns writes:

Two simple questions underscore my diagnosis: “Just whose ‘everyday life’ is depicted?” and “What is the relationship of the actors in this ‘everyday life’ to the viewers?”

The book contains her answers.

Indeed, as we saw when we quoted Evelyn Welch on page 56, art historians typically ask the questions “How?” “What?” “Why?” and “Who?”—and offer answers.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Generate ideas by asking yourself questions—and in this process do not hesitate to go back over the same ground. Good writing depends on good thinking, and good thinking keeps reexamining its conclusions.

4

FORMAL ANALYSIS AND STYLE

He has found his style when he cannot do otherwise.

—Paul Klee

All art is at once surface and symbol.

—Oscar Wilde

WHAT FORMAL ANALYSIS IS

The word *formal* in **formal analysis** is not used as the opposite of *informal*, as in a formal dinner or a formal dance. Rather, a formal analysis—the result of *looking* closely—is an analysis of the *form* the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning. Rudolf Arnheim’s assertion that the curves in Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* convey “transmitted, life-giving energy” is a brief example. (See page 50.) Similarly, one might say that a pyramid resting on its base conveys stability, whereas an inverted pyramid—one resting on a point—conveys instability or precariousness. Even if we grant that these forms may not universally carry these meanings, we can perhaps agree that at least in our culture they do. That is, members of a given *interpretive community* perceive certain forms or lines or colors or whatever in a certain way.

Formal analysis assumes a work of art is

1. a constructed object
2. with a stable meaning
3. that can be ascertained by studying the relationships between the elements of the work.

If the elements “cohere,” the work is “meaningful.” That is, the work of art is an independent object that possesses certain properties, and if we think straight, we can examine these properties and can say what the work represents and what it means. The work speaks directly to us, and we understand its language—we respond appropriately to its characteristics (shape, color, texture, and so on), at least if we share the artist’s culture.

Thus, a picture (or any other kind of artwork) is like a chair; a chair *can* be stood on or burned for firewood or used as a weapon, but it was created with a specific purpose that was evident and remains evident to all competent viewers—in this case people who are familiar with chairs. Further, it can be evaluated with reference to its purpose—we can say, for instance, that it is a poor chair because it is uncomfortable and fragile. (In a few moments we will consider opposing views.)

FORMAL ANALYSIS VERSUS DESCRIPTION

Is the term *formal analysis* merely a pretentious substitute for *description*? Not quite. A **description** is an impersonal inventory, dealing with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see: “A woman in a white dress sits at a table, reading a letter. Behind her . . .” It can also comment on the execution of the work (“thick strokes of paint,” “a highly polished surface”), but it does not offer inferences, and it does not evaluate. A highly detailed description that seeks to bring the image before the reader’s eyes—a kind of writing fairly common in the days before illustrations of artworks were readily available in books—is sometimes called an *ekphrasis* or *ecphrasis* (plural: *ekphraseis*), from the Greek word for “description” (*ek* = out, *phrazein* = tell, declare). Such a description may be set forth in terms that also seek to convey the writer’s emotional response to the work. That is, the description praises the work by seeking to give the reader a sense of being in its presence, especially by commenting on the presumed emotions expressed by the depicted figures. Here is an example: “We recoil with the terrified infant, who averts his eyes from the soldier whose heart is as hard as his burnished armor.”

Writing of this sort is no longer common; a description today is more likely to tell us, for instance, that the head of a certain portrait sculpture “faces front; the upper part of the nose and the rim of the right earlobe are missing. . . . The closely cropped beard and mustache are indicated by short random strokes of the chisel,” and so forth. These statements, from

an entry in the catalog of an exhibition, are all true and they can be useful, but they scarcely reveal the thought, the reflectiveness, that we associate with analysis. When the entry in the catalog goes on, however, to say that “the surfaces below the eyes and cheeks are sensitively modeled to suggest the soft, fleshly forms of age,” we begin to feel that now indeed we are reading not merely a description but an analysis, because here the writer is arguing a thesis.

Similarly, although the statement that “the surface is in excellent condition” is purely descriptive (despite the apparent value judgment in “excellent”), the statement that the “dominating block form” of the portrait contributes to “the impression of frozen tension” can reasonably be called analytic. One reason we can characterize this statement as analytic (rather than descriptive) is that it offers an argument, in this instance an argument concerned with cause and effect: The dominating block form, the writer argues, produces an effect—*causes* us to perceive a condition of frozen tension.

Much of any formal analysis will inevitably consist of description (“The pupils of the eyes are turned upward”), and accurate descriptive writing itself requires careful observation of the object and careful use of words. But an essay is a formal analysis rather than a description only if it connects effects with causes, thereby showing *how* the described object works. For example, “The pupils of the eyes are turned upward” is a description, but the following revision is an analytic statement: “The pupils of the eyes are turned upward, suggesting a heaven-fixed gaze, or, more bluntly, suggesting that the figure is divinely inspired.”

When one writes a formal analysis one takes a “look under the hood,” in the words of Professor Rosalind Krauss. Another way of putting it is to say that analysis tries to answer the somewhat odd-sounding question, “*How* does the work mean?” Thus, the following paragraph, because it is concerned with *how* form makes meaning, is chiefly analytic rather than descriptive. The author has made the point that a Protestant church emphasizes neither the altar nor the pulpit; “as befits the universal priesthood of all believers,” he says, a Protestant church is essentially an auditorium. He then goes on to analyze the ways in which a Gothic cathedral says or means something very different:

The focus of the space on the interior of a Gothic cathedral is . . . compulsive and unrelievedly concentrated. It falls, and falls exclusively, upon the sacrifice that is re-enacted by the mediating act of priest

before the altar-table. So therefore, by design, the first light that strikes the eye, as one enters the cathedral, is the jeweled glow of the lancets in the apse, before which the altar-table stands. The pulsating rhythm of the arches in the nave arcade moves toward it; the string-course moldings converge in perspective recession upon it. Above, the groins of the apse radiate from it; the ribshafts which receive them and descend to the floor below return the eye inevitably to it. It is the single part of a Gothic space in which definiteness is certified. In any other place, for any part which the eye may reach, there is always an indefinite beyond, which remains to be explored. Here there is none. The altar-table is the common center in which all movement comes voluntarily to rest.

—John F. A. Taylor, *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts*
(New York: Dover, 1964), 115–117

In this passage the writer is telling us, analytically, *how* the cathedral means.

Opposition to Formal Analysis

Formal analysis, we have seen, assumes that artists shape their materials so that a work of art embodies a particular meaning and evokes a pleasurable response in the spectator. The viewer today does not try to see the historical object with “period” eyes but, rather, sees it with an aesthetic attitude. The purpose of formal analysis is to show *how* intended meanings are communicated in an aesthetic object.

Since about 1970, however, these assumptions have been strongly called into question. There has been a marked shift of interest from the work as a thing whose meaning is contained within itself—a decontextualized object—to a thing whose meaning partly, largely, or even entirely consists of its context, its relation to things outside of itself (for instance, the institutions or individuals for whom the work was produced), especially its relationship to the person who perceives it.

Further, there has been a shift from viewing an artwork as a thing of value in itself—or as an object that provides pleasure and that conveys some sort of profound and perhaps universal meaning—to viewing the artwork as an object that reveals the power structure of a society. The work is brought down to earth, so to speak, and is said thereby to be “demystified.” Thus the student does not look for a presumed unified whole. On the contrary, the student “deconstructs” the work by looking

for “fissures” and “slippages” that give away—reveal, unmask—the underlying political and social realities that the artist sought to cover up with sensuous appeal.

A discussion of an early nineteenth-century idyllic landscape painting, for instance, today might call attention not to the elegant brushwork and the color harmonies (which earlier might have been regarded as sources of aesthetic pleasure), or even to the neat hedges and meandering streams (meant to evoke pleasing sensations), but to such social or psychological matters as the painter’s unwillingness to depict the hardships of rural life and the cruel economic realities of land ownership in an age when poor families could be driven from their homes at the whim of a rich landowner. Such a discussion might even argue that the picture, by means of its visual seductiveness, seeks to legitimize social inequities. (We will return to the matters of demystification and deconstruction in Chapter 10, when we look at the social historian’s approach to artworks, on pages 222–25.)

We can grant that works of art are partly shaped by social and political forces (these are the subjects of historical and political approaches, discussed in Chapter 10); and we can grant that works of art are partly shaped by the artist’s personality (the subject of psychoanalytical approaches, also discussed in Chapter 10). But this is only to say that works of art can be studied from several points of view; it does not invalidate the view that these works are also, at least in part, shaped by conscious intentions, and that the shapes or constructions that the artists (consciously or not) have produced convey a meaning.

STYLE AS THE SHAPER OF FORM

It is now time to define the elusive word **style**. The first thing to say is that the word is *not* used by most art historians to convey praise, as in “He has style.” Rather, it is used neutrally, for everyone and everything made has a style—good, bad, or indifferent. The person who, as we say, “talks like a book” has a style (probably an annoying one), and the person who keeps saying, “Uh, you know what I mean” has a style too (different, but equally annoying).

Similarly, whether we wear jeans or painter’s pants or gray flannel slacks, we have a style in our dress. We may claim to wear any old thing, but in fact we don’t; there are clothes we wouldn’t be caught dead in. The clothes we wear are expressive; they announce that we are police officers

or bankers or tourists or college students—or at least they show what we want to be thought to be, as when in the 1960s many young middle-class students wore tattered clothing, thus showing their allegiance to the poor and their enmity toward what was called the Establishment. It is not silly to think of our clothing as a sort of art that we make. Once we go beyond clothing as something that merely serves the needs of modesty and that provides protection against heat and cold and rain, we get clothing whose style is expressive.

To turn now to our central topic—style in art—we can all instantly tell the difference between a picture by van Gogh and one by Norman Rockwell or Walt Disney, even though the subject matter of all three pictures may be the same (e.g., a seated woman). How can we tell? By the style—that is, by line, color, medium, and all of the other things we talked about earlier in this chapter. Walt Disney's figures tend to be built up out of circles and ovals (think of Mickey Mouse), and the color shows no modeling or traces of brush strokes; Norman Rockwell's methods of depicting figures are different, and van Gogh's are different in yet other ways. Similarly, a Chinese landscape, painted with ink on silk or on paper, simply cannot look like a van Gogh landscape done with oil paint on canvas, partly because the materials prohibit such identity and partly because the Chinese painter's vision of landscape (usually lofty mountains) is not van Gogh's vision. Their works "say" different things. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it, "A change of style is a change of subject."

We recognize certain *distinguishing characteristics* (from large matters, such as choice of subject and composition, to small matters, such as kinds of brush strokes) that mark an artist, or a period, or a culture, and these constitute the style. Almost anyone can distinguish between a landscape painted by a traditional Chinese artist and one painted by van Gogh. But it takes considerable familiarity with van Gogh to be able to say of a work, "Probably 1888 or maybe 1889," just as it takes considerable familiarity with the styles of Chinese painters to be able to say, "This is a Chinese painting of the seventeenth century, in fact the late seventeenth century. It belongs to the Nanking School and is a work by Kung Hsien—not by a follower, and certainly not a copy, but the genuine article."

Style, then, is revealed in **form**; an artist creates form by applying certain techniques to certain materials, in order to embody a particular vision or content. In different ages people have seen things differently: the nude body as splendid, or the nude body as shameful; Jesus as majestic ruler, or Jesus as the sufferer on the cross; landscape as pleasant, domesticated countryside, or landscape as wild nature. So the chosen subject matter is

not only part of the content but is also part of that assemblage of distinguishing characteristics that constitutes a style.

All of the elements of style, finally, are expressive. Take ceramics as an example. The kind of clay, the degree of heat at which it is baked, the decoration or glaze (if any), the shape of the vessel, the thickness of its wall, all are elements of the potter's style, and all contribute to the expressive form. But not every expressive form is available in every age; certain visions, and certain technologies, are, in certain ages, unavailable. Porcelain, as opposed to pottery, requires a particular kind of clay and an extremely high temperature in the kiln, and these were simply not available to the earliest Japanese potters. Even the potter's wheel was not available to them; they built their pots by coiling ropes of clay and then, sometimes, they smoothed the surface with a spatula. The result is a kind of thick-walled, low-fired ceramic that expresses energy and earthiness, far different from those delicate Chinese porcelains that express courtliness and the power of technology (or, we might say, of art).

SAMPLE ESSAY: A FORMAL ANALYSIS

The following sample essay, written by an undergraduate, includes a good deal of description (a formal analysis usually begins with a fairly full description of the artwork), and the essay is conspicuously impersonal (another characteristic of a formal analysis). But notice that even this apparently dispassionate assertion of facts is shaped by a **thesis**. If we stand back from the essay, we can see that the basic point or argument is this: The sculpture successfully combines a highly conventional symmetrical style, on the one hand, with mild asymmetry and a degree of realism, on the other.

Put thus, the thesis does not sound especially interesting, but that is because the statement is highly abstract, lacking in concrete detail. A writer's job is to take that idea (thesis) and to present it in an interesting and convincing way. In drafting and revising an essay, good writers keep thinking, "I want my readers to see. . . ." The idea will come alive for the reader when the writer supports it by calling attention to specific details—the evidence—as the student writer does in the following essay.

Notice, by the way, that in his first sentence the student refers to "Figure 1," which is a photograph of the work he discusses. (The images in an essay or book are called figures, and they are numbered consecutively.)



Figure 1. Seated Statue of Prince Khunera as a Scribe. Egyptian, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, reign of Menkaure, 2490–2472 B.C. Object Place: Notes: Egypt (Giza, Menkaure Cemetery, MQ1). Limestone, Height \times width \times depth: 30.5 \times 21.5 \times 16 cm (12 \times 8 $\frac{7}{16}$ \times 6 $\frac{5}{16}$ in.) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, 13.3140.

This illustration originally appeared on a separate page at the end of the paper, but here it has been put before the essay.

Stephen Beer

Fine Arts 10A

September 10, 2006

Formal Analysis: *Prince Khunera as a Scribe*

Prince Khunera as a Scribe, a free-standing Egyptian sculpture 12 inches tall, now in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Figure 1), was found at Giza in a temple dedicated to the father of the prince, King Mycerinus. The limestone statue may have been a tribute to that Fourth Dynasty king.¹ The prince, sitting cross-legged with a

¹Museum label.

scribal tablet on his lap, rests his hands on his thighs. He wears only a short skirt or kilt.

The statue is in excellent condition although it is missing its right forearm and hand. Fragments of the left leg and the scribe's tablet also have been lost. The lack of any difference in the carving between the bare stomach and the kilt suggests that these two features were once differentiated by contrasting paint that has now faded, but the only traces of paint remaining on the figure are bits of black on the hair and eyes.

The statue is symmetrical, composed along a vertical axis which runs from the crown of the head into the base of the sculpture. The sculptor has relied on basic geometric forms in shaping the statue on either side of this axis. Thus, the piece could be described as a circle (the head) within a triangle (the wig) which sits atop a square and two rectangles (the torso, the crossed legs, and the base). The reliance on basic geometric forms reveals itself even in details. For example, the forehead is depicted as a small triangle within the larger triangular form of the headdress.

On closer inspection, however, one observes that the rigidity of both this geometric and symmetric organization is relieved by the artist's sensitivity to detail and by his ability as a sculptor. None of the shapes of the work is a true geometric form. The full, rounded face is more of an oval than a circle, but actually it is neither. The silhouette of the upper part of the body is defined by softly undulating lines that represent the muscles of the arms and that modify the simplicity of a strictly square shape. Where the prince's naked torso meets his kilt, just below the waist, the sculptor has suggested portliness by allowing the form of the stomach to swell slightly. Even the "circular" navel is flattened into an irregular shape by the suggested weight of the body. The contours

of the base, a simple matter at first glance, actually are not exactly four-square but rather are slightly curvilinear. Nor is the symmetry on either side of the vertical axis perfect: Both the mouth and the nose are slightly askew; the right and left forearms originally struck different poses; and the left leg is given prominence over the right. These departures from symmetry and from geometry enliven the statue, giving it both an individuality and a personality.

Although most of the statue is carved in broad planes, the sculptor has paid particular attention to details in the head. There he attempted to represent realistically the details of the prince's face. The parts of the eyes, for example—the eyebrows, eyelids, eyeballs, and sockets—are distinct. Elsewhere the artist has not worked in such probing detail. The breasts, for instance, are rendered in large forms, the nipples being absent. The attention to the details of the face suggests that the artist attempted to render a likeness of the prince himself.

The prince is represented in a scribe's pose but without a scribe's tools. The prince is not actually *doing* anything. He merely sits. The absence of any open spaces (between the elbows and the waist) contributes to the figure's composure or self-containment. But if he sits, he sits attentively: There is nothing static here. The slight upward tilt of the head and the suggestion of an upward gaze of the eyes give the impression that the alert prince is attending someone else, perhaps his father the king. The suggestion in the statue is one of imminent work rather than of work in process.

Thus, the statue, with its variations from geometric order, suggests the presence, in stone, of a particular man. The pose may be standard and the outer form may appear rigid at first, yet the sculptor has managed to depict an individual. The details of the face and the overfleshed belly reveal an intent to portray a person, not just

an idealized member of the scribal profession. Surely when freshly painted these elements of individuality within the confines of conventional forms and geometric structure were even more compelling.

Behind the Scene: Beer's Essay, from Early Responses to Final Version

This essay is good because it is clear and interesting and especially because it helps the reader to see and enjoy the work of art. Now let's go backstage, so to speak, to see how Stephen Beer turned his notes into an effective final draft.

Beer's Earliest Responses. After studying the object and reading the museum label, Beer jotted down ideas in the Notebook application from Circus Ponies Software, although he could just as easily have used several other applications (see page 126 for a list of software that may be useful). What historical information does the label provide? (Beer recorded the material on a page for that object.) Can the sculpture be called realistic? Yes and no. (Beer put his responses, in words, on another notebook page.) What is the condition of the piece? (Again he put his responses in their own notebook pages.) A day later, when he returned to work on his paper, stimulated by another look at the artwork and by a review of his notes, Beer made additional jottings.

Organizing Notes. When the time came to turn the notes into a draft and the revised draft into an essay, Beer reviewed the notes and he added further thoughts. Next, he organized the note pages, putting together into one section whatever pages he had about (for instance) realism, and putting together, into another section, whatever note pages he had about (again, for instance) background material. Reviewing the notes in each section, and on the basis of the review (after making a backup copy), deleting a few pages that no longer seemed useful, as well as moving an occasional page into a different section (via the Contents view), Beer started to think about how he might organize his essay.

As a first step in settling on an organization, he arranged the notebook sections into a sequence that seemed reasonable to him. It made sense, he thought, to begin with some historical background and a brief description, then to touch on Egyptian sculpture in general (but he soon decided *not* to include this general material), then to go on to some large points about the particular piece, then to refine some of

these points, and finally to offer some sort of conclusion. This organization, he felt, was reasonable and would enable his reader to follow his argument easily.

Preparing a Preliminary Outline. In order to get a clearer idea of where he might be going, Beer then typed an outline—the gist of what at this stage seemed to be the organization of his chief points (see page 125) in the OmniOutliner (Omni Group), although he could just as easily have used the Outline view in Microsoft Word. In short, he prepared a map or rough outline so that he could easily see, almost at a glance, if each part of his paper would lead coherently to the next part.

In surveying his outline, Beer became aware of points that he should have included but that he had overlooked.

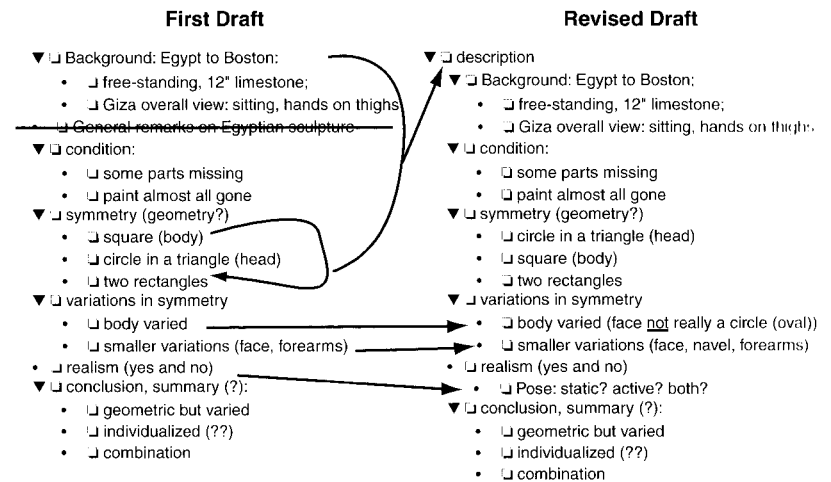
A tentative outline, after all, is not a straitjacket that determines the shape of the final essay. To the contrary, it is a preliminary map that, when examined, helps the writer to see not only pointless detours—these will be eliminated in the draft—but also undeveloped areas that need to be worked up. As the two versions of Beer's outline indicate, after drafting his map he made some important changes before writing a first draft.

Writing a Draft. Working from his thoughtfully revised outline, Beer wrote a first draft, which he then revised into a second draft. The second draft, when further revised, became the final essay. Modern word-processing programs, such as Microsoft Word, allow you to track the revisions made to a document and look at different versions of a document. However, many writers find comfort in having a printed copy of each draft to go over with a pen; the desired changes can then be made (and kept track of) on the computer.

The word *draft*, by the way, comes from the same Old English root that gives us *draw*. When you draft an essay, you are making a sketch, putting on paper (or screen) a sketch or plan that you will later refine.

Outlining a Draft. A good way to test the coherence of a final draft—to see if indeed it qualifies as an essay rather than as a draft—is to outline it, paragraph by paragraph, in *two* ways, indicating

- (a) what each paragraph *says*
- (b) what each paragraph *does*



Here is a double outline of this sort for Beer's seven-paragraph essay. In (a) we get a brief summary of what Beer is *saying* in each paragraph, and in (b) we get, in the italicized words, a description of what he is *doing* in the paragraph.

1. a. Historical background and brief description
b. *Introduces* the artwork
2. a. The condition of the artwork
b. *Provides further overall description, preparatory* to the analysis
3. a. The geometry of the work
b. *Introduces the thesis*, concerning the basic, overall geometry
4. a. Significant details
b. *Modifies (refines) the argument*
5. a. The head
b. *Compares* the realism of head with the breasts, in order to make the point that the head is more detailed
6. a. The pose
b. *Argues* that the pose is not static
7. a. Geometric, yet individual
b. *Concludes*, largely by *summarizing*

Some Useful Software Programs for Writers

Name	Publisher	Platforms	Notes
Circus Ponies Notebook	Circus Ponies Software	Mac OS X	Keyword-organized note pages in multiple sections; built-in outlining
NoteTaker	AquaMinds	Mac OS X	Keyword-organized note pages, built-in outlining
WhizFolders	WhizFolders	Windows 98, XP, 2000	Note organizer and outline, bibliographic organization features
Organizer Pro			
OmniOutliner	Omni Group	Mac OS X	Powerful outlining features with some free-form note capabilities
KeyNote	Tranglos	Windows 95 and later	Free, outlining and note-taking
Microsoft Word	Microsoft Corp.	Windows, Mac OS X	Word processor also has both notebook (including drawing) and outline views
EndNote	Thomson	Windows Mac OS X Mac OS X	Bibliographic database, interfaces with Word, tracks citations, can search online references
Sente	Third Street Software	Mac OS X	Bibliographic database, interfaces with Word and Mellel, tracks citations, can search online references
Inspiration	Inspiration Software, Inc.	Windows, Mac OS X; Mac OS Classic, Handhelds	Project and note organization, flow charts
iLiner	Mercury Software	Mac OS X	Document summarization, organization, brainstorming, outlining
Ulysses	The Blue Technologies Group	Mac OS X	Writer's word processor, organizes notes, chapters, documents
CopyWrite	Bartas Technologies	Mac OS X	Writer's word processor, organizes notes, chapters, documents. Free for small projects

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

You may or may not want to sketch a rough outline before drafting your essay, but you certainly should outline what you hope is your final draft, to see (a) if it is organized, and (b) if the organization will be evident to the reader.

An outline of this sort, in which you force yourself to consider not only the content but also the function of each paragraph, will help you to see if your essay (a) says something and (b) says it with the help of an effective structure. If the structure is sound, your argument will flow nicely.

POSTSCRIPT: THOUGHTS ABOUT THE WORDS "REALISTIC" AND "IDEALIZED"

In his fifth paragraph (page 122) Beers uses the word "realistically," and in his final paragraph he uses "idealized." These words, common in essays on art, deserve comment. Let's begin a bit indirectly. Aristotle (384–322 BC) says that the arts originate in two basic human impulses, the impulse to imitate (from the Greek word *mimesis*, imitation) and the impulse to create patterns or harmony. In small children we find both (1) the impulse to imitate in their mimicry of others and (2) the impulse to harmony in their fondness for rocking and for strongly rhythmic nursery rhymes. Most works of art, as we shall see, combine imitation (mimicry, a representation of what the eye sees, realism) with harmony (an overriding form or pattern produced by a shaping idea). "We can imagine," Kenneth Clark wrote, "that the early sculptor who found the features of a head conforming to an ovoid, or the body conforming to a column, had a deep satisfaction. Now it looks as if it would last" (Introduction to *Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries*, 1970, page 15). In short, artists have eyes, but they also have ideas about basic patterns that underlie the varied phenomena around us.

For an extreme example of a body simplified to a column—a body shaped by the *idea* that a body conforms to a column—we can look at Constantin Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Man* (1924). Here the artist's idea has clearly dominated his eye; we can say that this body is **idealized**.

Looking at this work, we are not surprised to learn that Brancusi said he was concerned with the “eternal type [i.e., the prototype] of ephemeral forms,” and that “What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things. . . . It is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface.” The real or essential form represented in this instance is both the young man of the title and also the phallus.

The idea underlying works that are said to be idealized usually is the idea of beauty. Thus, tradition says that Raphael, seeking a model

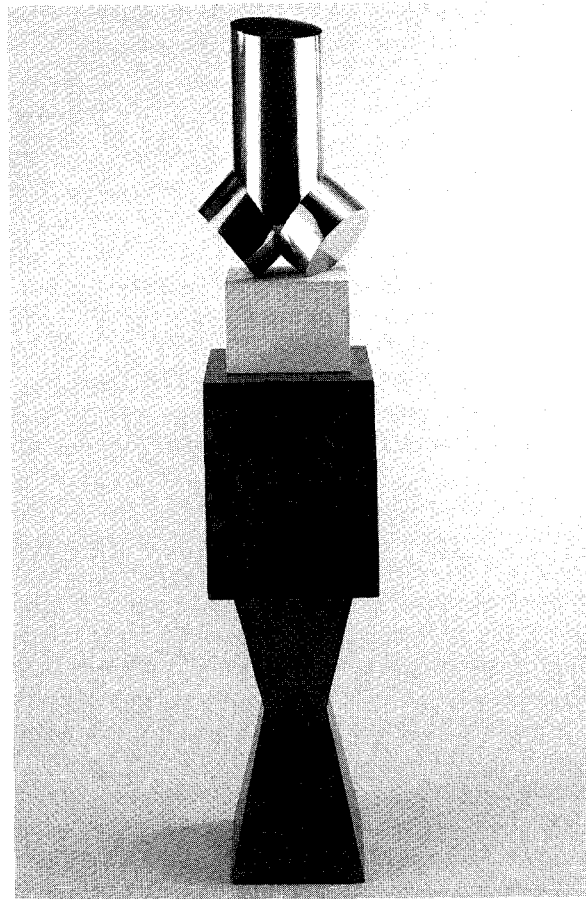


Figure 2. Constantin Brancusi, *Torso of a Young Man*, 1924. Polished brass, 18"; with original wood base, 58 1/2". Photographer: Lee Stalsworth. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

for the beautiful mythological Galatea, could not find one model who was in all respects beautiful enough, so he had to draw on several women (the lips of one, the hair of another, and so on) in order to paint an image that expressed the ideally beautiful woman. Examples of idealized images of male beauty are provided by many portrait heads of Antinous (also Antinoös), the youth beloved by the Roman emperor Hadrian. Writing in the *Bulletin* of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Elizabeth J. Milleker calls attention to the combination of “actual features of the boy” and “an idealized image” in such a head (see the head of Antinoos on this page):

This head is a good example of the sophisticated portrait type created by imperial sculptors to incorporate what must have been actual features of the boy in an idealized image that conveys a godlike beauty. The ovoid face with a straight brow, almond-shaped eyes, smooth cheeks, and fleshy lips is surrounded by abundant tousled curls. The ivy wreath encircling his head associates him with Dionysos, a guarantor of renewal and good fortune.

—Metropolitan Museum of Art *Bulletin* (Fall 1997): 15

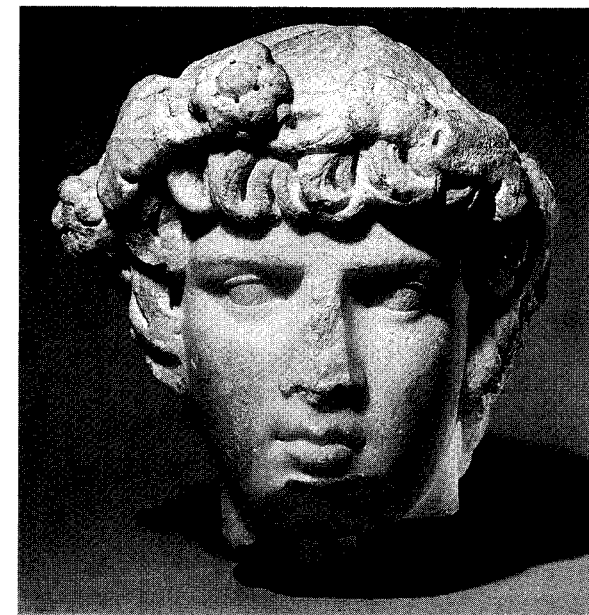


Figure 3. Roman, *Portrait Head of Antinoos*, AD 130–38. Marble, 9 3/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Bronson Pinchot in recognition of his mother, Rosina Asta Pinchot, 1996. (1996.401).

Realism has at least two meanings in writings about art: (1) a movement in mid-nineteenth-century Western Europe and America, which emphasized the everyday subjects of ordinary life, as opposed to subjects drawn from mythology, history, and upper-class experience; and (2) fidelity to appearances, the accurate rendition of the surfaces of people, places, and things. In our discussion of realism, we will be concerned only with the second definition. *Naturalism* is often used as a synonym for *realism*; thus, a work that reproduces surfaces may be said to be realistic, naturalistic, or illusionistic; *veristic* is also used, but less commonly. The most extreme form of realism is *trompe-l'oeil* (French: deceives the eye), complete illusionism—the painted fly on the picture frame, the waxwork museum guard standing in a doorway, images created with the purpose of deceiving the viewer. But of course most images are not the exact size of the model, so even if they are realistically rendered, they do not deceive. When we look at most images, we are aware that we are looking not at reality (a fly, a human being) but at the product of the artist's gaze at such real things. Further, the medium itself may prohibit illusionism; an unpainted stone or bronze head, however accurate in its representation of cheekbones, hair, the shape of the nose, and so forth, cannot be taken for Abraham Lincoln.

Idealism, like realism, has at least two meanings in art: (1) the belief that a work conveys an idea as well as appearances and (2) the belief—derived partly from the first meaning—that it should convey an idea that elevates the thoughts of the spectator, and it does this by presenting an image, let's say of heroism or of motherhood, loftier than any real object that we can see in the imperfect world around us. (Do not confuse *idealism* as it is used in art with its everyday meaning, as in “despite her years, she retained her idealism,” where the word means “noble goals.”) The story of Raphael's quest for a model for Galatea (mentioned on pages 128–29) is relevant here, and somewhat similarly, the Hadrianic sculptors who made images of Antinous, as the writer in the Metropolitan Museum's *Bulletin* said, must have had in mind not a particular youth but the idea of “godlike beauty.”

By way of contrast, consider Sir Peter Lely's encounter with Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), the English general and statesman. Cromwell is reported to have said to the painter, “Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark [i.e., take notice of] all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me.” Cromwell was asking for a realistic (or naturalistic, or veristic) portrait, not an idealized portrait like the sculpture of Antinous. What would an idealized portrait look like? It would omit the

blemishes. Why? Because the blemishes would be thought to be mere trivial surface details that would get between the viewer and the artist's *idea* of Cromwell, Cromwell's essence as the artist perceives it—for instance, the nobility that characterized his statesmanship and leadership. What distinguishes the idealizing artist from the ordinary person, it is said, is the artist's imaginative ability to penetrate the visible (the surface) and set forth an elevating ideal.

In short, *realism* is defined as the representation of visual phenomena as exactly—as realistically—as the medium (stone, bronze, paint on paper or canvas) allows. At the other extreme from illusionism we have idealism, for instance, in the representation of the torso of a young man by a column. A realistic portrait of Cromwell will show him as he appears to the eye, warts and all; an idealized portrait will give us the idea of Cromwell by, so to speak, airbrushing the warts, giving him some extra stature, slimming him down a bit, giving him perhaps a more thoughtful face than he had, setting him in a pyramidal composition to emphasize his stability, thereby stimulating our minds to perceive the nobility of his cause.

Both realism and idealism have had their advocates. As a spokesperson for realism we can take Leonardo, who in his *Notebooks* says that “the mind of the painter should be like a looking-glass that is filled with as many images as there are objects before him.” Against this view we can take a remark by a contemporary painter, Larry Rivers: “I am not interested in the art of holding up mirrors.” Probably most artists offer the Aristotelian combination of imitation and harmony. The apparently realistic (primarily mimetic) artist is concerned at least in some degree with a pattern or form that helps to order the work and to give it meaning, and the apparently idealistic artist—even the nonobjective artist who might seem to deal only in harmonious shapes and colors—is concerned with connecting the work to the world we live in, for instance, to our emotions. An artist might deliberately depart from surface realism—mimetic accuracy—in order to “defamiliarize” or “estrangle” our customary perceptions, slowing us down or shaking us up, so to speak, in order to jostle us out of our stock responses, thereby letting us see reality freshly. Although this idea is especially associated with the Russian Formalist school of the early twentieth century, it can be traced back to the early-nineteenth-century Romantic writers. For instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge praised the poetry of William Wordsworth because, in Coleridge's words, it removed “the film of familiarity” that clouded our usual vision.

Somewhere near the middle of the spectrum, between artists who offer highly mimetic representations and at the other extreme those who

offer representations that bear little resemblance to what we see, we have the sculptor, hypothesized by Kenneth Clark, who saw the head as an ovoid and said to himself, "Now it looks as if it would last." Here the "idea" that shapes the features of the head (for instance, bringing the ears closer to the skull) is the idea of perfection and endurance, stability, even eternity, and surely some such thoughts cross our minds when we perceive works that we love. One might almost write a history of art in terms of the changing proportions of realism and idealism during the lifetime of a culture.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

There is nothing wrong with using the words *realistic* and *idealized* in your essay, but keep in mind that it is not a matter of all-or-nothing; there are degrees of realism and degrees of idealization.

It is easy to find remarks by artists setting forth a middle view. In an exhibition catalog (1948), Henri Matisse said, "There is an inherent truth which must be disengaged from the outward appearances of the object to be represented. . . . Exactitude is not truth." And most works of art are neither purely realistic (concerned only with "exactitude," realistic description) nor purely idealistic (concerned only with "an inherent truth"). Again we think of Aristotle's combination of the impulse to imitate and the impulse to create harmony. We might think, too, of a comment by Picasso: "If you want to draw, you must first shut your eyes and sing."

We can probably agree that *Prince Khunera as a Scribe* (page 120) shows a good deal of idealism, but it also shows realistic touches. Stephen Beer's analysis calls attention to its idealized quality, in its symmetry and its nearly circular head, but he also says that the eye is rendered with "descriptive accuracy." Or look at Michelangelo's *David* (page 49). It is realistic in its depiction of the veins in David's hands, but it is idealized in its color (not flesh color but white to suggest purity), in its size (much larger than life, to convey the ideal of heroism), and in its nudity. Surely Michelangelo did not think David went into battle naked, so why is his David nude? Because Michelangelo, carving the statue in part to commemorate the civic constitution of the Florentine republic, wanted to convey the ideas of justice and of classical heroism, and classical sculptures of heroes were nude. We can, then, talk about Michelangelo's idealism, and—still talking of the same image—we can talk about his realism.

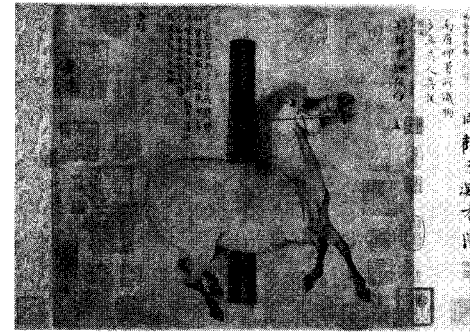


Figure 4. Chinese paintings. *Night-Shining White*, Tang Dynasty (618?907), 8th century. Attributed to Han Gan (Chinese, act. 742?756?) China Handscroll; ink on paper, 12 1/4 x 13 3/4 in. (30.8 x 34 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, The Dillon Fund, 1977 (1977.78). Photographer: Malcom Varon. 1990.

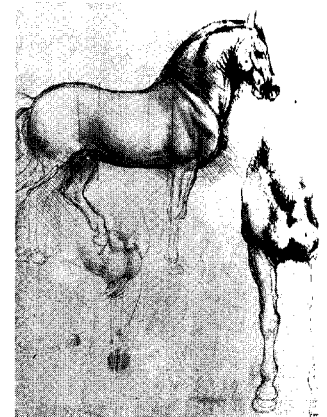


Figure 5. Leonardo Da Vinci, *A Horse in Profile to the Right, and its Forelegs*, c. 1490. Silverpoint on blue prepared surface, 8 1/2 x 6 3/8". The Royal Collection © 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Consider the three pictures of horses shown on pages 133–34. Han Gan's painting (upper left) is less concerned with accurately rendering the appearance of a horse than with rendering its great inner spirit, hence the head and neck that are too large for the body, and the body that is too large for the legs. The legs, though in motion to show the horse's grace and liveliness, are diminished because the essence of the horse is the strength of its body, communicated partly by juxtaposing the arcs of its rump and its (unreal) electrified mane with the stolid hitching post. In brief, the painting shows what we in the West probably would call an idealized horse, although the Chinese might say that by revealing the spirit the picture captures the "real" horse. (It once had a tail, but the tail has been largely eroded by wear, and the vestiges have been obscured by an owner's seal.)

Leonardo's drawing (upper right) is largely concerned with anatomical correctness, and we can call it realistic. Still, by posing the horse in profile, Leonardo calls attention to the animal's geometry, notably the curves of the neck, chest, and rump, and despite the accurate detail the picture seems to represent not a particular horse but the essential idea of a horse. (Doubtless the blank background and the absence of a groundplane here, as in the Chinese painting, contribute to this impression of idealizing.)

George Stubbs's painting of Hambletonian (bottom), who had recently won an important race, surely is an accurate representation of a particular horse, but even here we can note an idealizing element: Stubbs emphasizes the animal's heroic stature by spreading its image across the canvas so that the horse dwarfs the human beings and the buildings.

If your instructor asks you to compare two works—perhaps an Egyptian ruler and a Greek athlete, or an Indian Buddha and a Chinese Buddha—you may well find one of them more realistic than the other, but remember, even a highly realistic work may include idealized elements, and an idealized work may include realistic elements.

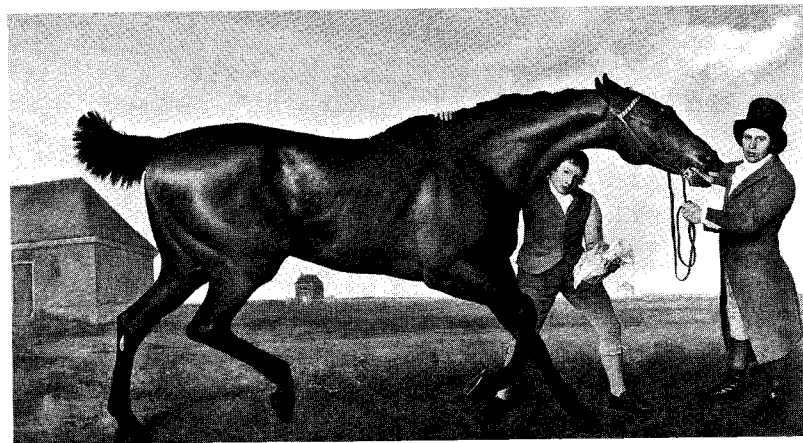


Figure 6. Great Britain, County Down, Mount Stewart House & Garden—*Hambletonian* by George Stubbs © 1800. Oil on canvas 82 1/2" × 144 3/4". Photographer: NTPL. The Image Works.

5

WRITING A COMPARISON

If you really want to see something, look at something else.

—Howard Nemerov

Everything is what it is and not another thing.

—Bishop Joseph Butler

COMPARING AS A WAY OF DISCOVERING

Analysis frequently involves comparing: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Strictly speaking, if one emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities, one is contrasting rather than comparing, but we need not preserve this distinction; we can call both processes *comparing*.

Although your instructor may ask you to write a comparison of two works of art, the *subject* of the essay is the *works*, or, more precisely, the subject is the thesis you are advancing; for example, that one work is later than the other or is more successful. Comparison is simply an effective analytical *technique* to show some of the qualities of the works. We usually can get a clearer idea of what X is when we compare it to Y—provided that Y is at least somewhat like X. Comparing, in short, is a way of discovering, a way of learning, and ultimately a way of helping your reader to see things your way.

In the words of Howard Nemerov, quoted at the top of this page, “If you really want to see something, look at something else.” But the “something else” can’t be any old thing. It has to be relevant. For example, in a course in architecture you may compare two subway stations (considering the efficiency of the pedestrian patterns, the amenities, and the aesthetic qualities), with the result that you may come to understand both of them more fully; but a comparison of a subway station with a dormitory, no matter how elegantly written, can hardly teach the reader or the writer anything. Nor can a comparison of the House of Commons with the House of Pancakes teach anything, as Judith Stone entertainingly demonstrates

in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* (26 February 1995): She compares the number (1 House of Commons versus 620 Houses of Pancakes), the tipping practice (not allowed in the House of Commons but permitted in the House of Pancakes), the preferred salutation ("My honorable friend" versus "hon"), and so forth. If you keep in mind the principle that a comparison should help you to learn, you will not (unless you are kidding around) make useless comparisons, such as "What do Winnie the Pooh and Alexander the Great have in common?" "Same middle name."

Art historians almost always use comparisons when they discuss authenticity: A work of uncertain attribution is compared with undoubtedly genuine works on the assumption that an inauthentic work, when closely compared with genuine works, will somehow be markedly different, perhaps in brush technique, and thereby shown probably not to be genuine (here we get to the thesis) despite superficial similarities of, say, subject matter and medium. (This assumption can be challenged—a given artist may have produced a work with unique characteristics—but it is nevertheless widely held.)

Comparisons are also commonly used in dating a work, and thus in tracing the history of an artistic movement or the development of an artist's career. The assumption here is that certain qualities in a work indicate the period, the school, perhaps the artist, and even the period within the artist's career. Let's assume, for instance, that there is no doubt about who painted a particular picture, and that the problem is the date of the work. By comparing this work with a picture that the artist is known to have done, say, in 1850, and with yet another that the artist is known to have done in 1870, one may be able to conjecture that the undated picture was done, say, midway between the dated works, or that it is close in time to one or the other.

The assumptions underlying the uses of comparison are that an expert can recognize not only the stylistic characteristics of an artist, but can also identify those that are permanent and can establish the chronology of those that are temporary. In practice these assumptions are usually based on yet another assumption: A given artist's early works are relatively immature; the artist then matures, and if there are some dated works, we can with some precision trace this development or evolution. Whatever the merits of these assumptions, comparison is a tool by which students of art often seek to establish authenticity and chronology. Again, the comparison is not made for the sake of writing a comparison; rather, it is made for the sake of making a point.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

In making a comparison, do not simply make a list of similarities or of differences; make a *point*. Indeed you may want to introduce the comparison with a thesis sentence.

TWO WAYS OF ORGANIZING A COMPARISON

We can call the two ways of organizing a comparison *block-by-block* (or, less elegantly but perhaps more memorably, *lumping*) and *point-by-point* (or *splitting*). When you compare block-by-block, you say what you have to say about one artwork in a block or lump, and then you go on to discuss the second artwork, in another block or lump. When you compare point-by-point, however, you split up your discussion of each work, more or less interweaving your comments on the two things being compared, perhaps in alternating paragraphs, or even in alternating sentences.

Here is a miniature essay—it consists of only one paragraph—that illustrates lumping. The writer compares a Japanese statue of a Buddha (below) with a Chinese statue of a bodhisattva (page 139). (A Buddha has achieved enlightenment and has withdrawn from the world. A bodhisattva—in Sanskrit the term means "enlightened being"—is, like a Buddha, a person of very great spiritual enlightenment, but unlike a Buddha, a bodhisattva chooses to remain in this world in order to save humankind.) The writer's point here is simply to inform the museum-goer that all early East Asian religious images are not images of the Buddha. The writer says what she has to say about the Buddha, all in one lump, and then in another lump says what she has to say about the bodhisattva.

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere in the lotus position (legs crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. The carved folds of his garments, in keeping with the erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern that is an outward expression of his remote, constrained, austere inner nature. The bodhisattva, on the other hand, sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as "royal ease," the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. He is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

The structure is, simply, this:

The Buddha (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

The bodhisattva (posture, folds of garments, inner nature)

If, however, the writer had wished to split rather than to lump, she would have compared an aspect of the Buddha with an aspect of the bodhisattva, then another aspect of the Buddha with another aspect of the bodhisattva, and so on, perhaps ending with a synthesis to clarify the point of the comparison. The paragraph might have read like this:

The Buddha, recognizable by a cranial bump that indicates a sort of supermind, sits erect and austere, in the lotus position (legs crossed, each foot with the sole upward on the opposing thigh), in full control of his body. In contrast, the bodhisattva sits in a languid, sensuous posture known as "royal ease," the head pensively tilted downward, one knee elevated, one leg hanging down. The carved folds of the Buddha's garments, in keeping with his erect posture, are severe, forming a highly disciplined pattern, whereas the bodhisattva's garments hang naturalistically. Both figures are



Shaka nyorai, The Historical Buddha. Sakyamuni Buddha. Japanese, late Heian period, late 10th–early 11th century. Cherry with polychrome and gold; single woodblock construction, 83 cm (32 $\frac{1}{16}$ in.) (height of figure). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, 09.72.

spiritual, but the Buddha is remote, constrained, and austere; the bodhisattva is accessible, relaxed, and compassionate.

In effect the structure is this:

The Buddha (posture)

The bodhisattva (posture)

The Buddha (garments)

The bodhisattva (garments)

The Buddha and the bodhisattva (synthesis)

When you offer an extended comparison, it is advisable to begin by indicating your focus, that is, by defining the main issue or problem—for



Guanyin, Chinese, Song dynasty, 12th century. Wood with traces of polychrome and gilt. Overall: 141 × 88 × 88 cm (55 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 34 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 34 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Hervey E. Wetzel, 20.590.

instance, the kind of ivory, the subject matter, the treatment of space, and the style of the carving suggest that this piece is fourteenth-century French and that piece is a modern fake—and also by indicating what your principle of organization will be.

Caution: Splitting is well suited to short essays, say from one to three paragraphs, or for occasional use within longer essays, but if it is relentlessly used as the organizing principle of a longer essay, it is likely to produce a Ping-Pong effect. The essay may not come into focus—the reader may not grasp the point—until the writer stands back from the seven-layer cake and announces, in the concluding paragraph, that the odd layers taste better. In your preparatory thinking, splitting probably will help you to get certain characteristics clear in your mind, but you must come to some conclusions about what these add up to before writing the final version. The final version should not duplicate the preliminary thought processes; rather, since the point of a comparison is to make a point, it should be organized so as to make the point clearly and effectively.

Lumping, especially if the essay is no longer than two or three paragraphs, will often do the trick. After reflection you may decide that although there are superficial similarities between *X* and *Y*, there are essential differences; in the finished essay, then, you probably will not wish to obscure the main point by jumping back and forth from one work to the other, working through a series of similarities and differences. It may be better to announce your thesis, then discuss *X*, and then *Y*.

Whether in any given piece of writing you should compare by lumping or by splitting will depend largely on your purpose and on the complexity of the material. Lumping is usually preferable for long, complex comparisons, if for no other reason than to avoid the Ping-Pong effect, but no hard-and-fast rule covers all cases here. Some advice, however, may be useful:

If you split, in rereading your draft:

- *Ask yourself if your imagined reader can keep up with the back-and-forth movement.* Make sure (perhaps by a summary sentence at the end) that the larger picture is not obscured by the zigzagging.
- *Don't leave any loose ends.* Make sure that if you call attention to points 1, 2, and 3 in *X*, you mention all of them (not just 1 and 2) in *Y*.

If you lump, do not simply comment first on *X* and then on *Y*.

- *Let your reader know where you are going*, probably by means of an introductory sentence.

- *Don't be afraid in the second half to remind the reader of the first half.* It is legitimate, even desirable, to connect the second half of the comparison (chiefly concerned with *Y*) to the first half (chiefly concerned with *X*). Thus, you will probably say things like "Unlike *X*, *Y* show. . ." or "Although *Y* superficially resembles *X* in such-and-such, when looked at closely *Y* shows. . ."

In short, a comparison organized by lumping will not break into two separate halves if the second half develops by reminding the reader how it differs from the first half.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you write a comparison you are not merely making two lists. Rather, you are making a point, arguing a thesis.

Again, the point of a comparison is to call attention to the unique features of something by holding it up against something similar but significantly different. If the differences are great and apparent, a comparison is a waste of effort. (Blueberries are different from elephants. Blueberries do not have trunks. And elephants do not grow on bushes.) Indeed, a comparison between essentially and obviously unlike things will merely confuse, for by making the comparison, the writer implies that there are significant similarities, and readers can only wonder why they do not see them. The essays that do break into unrelated halves are essays that have no focus and that make uninformative comparisons: The first half tells the reader about five qualities in El Greco; the second half tells the reader about five different qualities in Rembrandt. You will notice in the following student essay that the second half occasionally looks back to the first half.

SAMPLE ESSAY: A STUDENT'S COMPARISON

This essay, by an undergraduate, discusses one object and then discusses a second. It lumps rather than splits. It does not break into two separate parts because at the start it looks forward to the second object, and in the second half of the essay it occasionally reminds us of the first object.

When you read this essay, don't let its excellence lead you into thinking that you can't do as well. The essay, keep in mind, is the product of much writing and rewriting. As Rebecca Bedell wrote, her ideas got better and better, for in her drafts she sometimes put down a point and then realized that it needed strengthening (e.g., with concrete details) or that—come to think of it—the point was wrong and ought to be deleted. She also derived some minor assistance—for facts, not for her fundamental thinking—from books, which she cites in footnotes.

Brief marginal annotations have been added to the following essay in order to help you appreciate the writer's skill in presenting her ideas.

Rebecca Bedell
FA 232 American Art

*Title is focused
and, in
"Development,"
implies the thesis*

John Singleton Copley's Early Development:

From *Mrs. Joseph Mann* to *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait*

Several Sundays ago while I was wandering

Opening paragraph is unusually personal but engaging, and it implies the problem the writer will address

through the American painting section of the Museum of Fine Arts, a professorial bellow shook me. Around the corner strode a well-dressed mustachioed member of the art historical elite, a gaggle of note-taking students following in his wake. "And here," he said, "we have John Singleton Copley." He marshaled his group about the rotunda, explaining that, "as one can easily see from these paintings, Copley never really learned to paint until he went to England."

A walk around the rotunda together with a quick leafing through a catalog of Copley's work should convince any viewer that Copley reached his artistic maturity years before he left for England in 1774.

A comparison of two paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, *Mrs. Joseph Mann* of 1753 (Figure 1) and

Thesis is clearly announced

Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait of ca. 1771 (Figure 2), reveals that Copley had made huge advances in his style and technique even before he left America; by the time of his departure he was already a great portraitist. Both paintings are half-length portraits of seated women, and both are accompanied by paired portraits of their husbands.

*Brief description
of the first work*

The portrait of Mrs. Joseph Mann, the twenty-two-year-old wife of a tavern keeper in Wrentham, Massachusetts,¹ is signed and dated "J. S. Copley 1753." One of Copley's earliest known works, painted when he was only fifteen years old, it depicts a robust young woman staring candidly at the viewer. Seated outdoors in front of a rock outcropping, she rests her left elbow on a classical pedestal and she dangles a string of pearls from her left hand.

*Relation of the
painting to its
source*

The painting suffers from being tied too closely to its mezzotint prototype. The composition is an almost exact mirror image of that used in Isaac Beckett's mezzotint after William Wissing's *Princess Anne* of ca. 1683.² Pose, props, and background are all lifted directly from the print. Certain changes, however, were necessary to acclimatize the image to its new

¹Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), I: 110.

²Charles Coleman Sellers, "Mezzotint Prototypes of Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr.," *Art Quarterly* 20 (1957): 407–68. See especially plate 16.



Figure 1. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Joseph Mann (Bethia Torrey)*, 1753. Oil on canvas, 91.44 × 71.75 cm. (36 × 28 1/4 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Frederick H. Metcalf and Holbrook E. Metcalf, 43.1353.



Figure 2. John Singleton Copley, American, 1738–1815. *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis)*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 127.32 × 101.92 cm (50 1/8 × 40 1/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of John T. Bowen in memory of Eliza M. Bowen, 41.84.

American setting. Princess Anne is shown provocatively posed in a landscape setting. Her blouse slips from her shoulders to reveal an enticing amount of bare bosom. Her hair curls lasciviously over her shoulders and a pearl necklace slides suggestively through her fingers as though, having removed the pearls, she will proceed further to disrobe. But Copley reduces the sensual overtones. Mrs. Mann's bodice is decorously raised to ensure sufficient coverage, and the alluring gaze of the princess is replaced by a cool stare. However, the suggestive pearls remain intact, producing an oddly discordant note.

First sentence of paragraph is both a transition and a topic sentence: the weakness of the painting

The picture has other problems as well. The young Copley obviously had not yet learned to handle his medium. The brush strokes are long and streaky. The shadows around the nose are a repellent greenish purple, and the highlight on the bridge was placed too far to one side. The highlights in the hair were applied while the underlying brown layer was still wet so that instead of gleaming curls he produced dull gray smudges. In addition, textural differentiation is noticeably lacking. The texture of the rock is the same as the skin, which is the same as the satin and the grass and the pearls. The anatomy is laughable: There is no sense of underlying structure. The arms and neck are the inflated tubes so typical of provincial portraiture. The left earlobe is missing, and the little finger on the left hand is disturbingly disjointed. Light too appears to have given Copley trouble. It seems, in general, to fall from the upper left, but the shadows are not consistently applied.

Concrete details support the paragraph's opening assertion

*Transition
("Despite its
faults") and
statement of idea
that unifies the
paragraph*

And the light-dark contrasts are rather too sharp, probably due to an overreliance on the mezzotint source.

Despite its faults, however, the painting still represents a remarkable achievement for a boy of fifteen. In the crisp linearity of the design, the sense of weight and bulk of the figure, the hint of a psychological presence, and especially in the rich vibrant color, Copley has already rivaled and even surpassed the colonial painters of the previous generation.

*Transition
("about seven-
teen years later")
and reassertion
of central thesis*

In *Mrs. Ezekial Goldthwait*, about seventeen years later and about four years before Copley went to England, all the early ineptness had disappeared. Copley has arrived at a style that is both uniquely his own and uniquely American; and in this style he achieves a level of quality comparable to any of his English contemporaries.

*Brief description
of the second
picture*

The substantial form of Mrs. Goldthwait dominates the canvas. She is seated at a round tilt-top table, one hand extended over a tempting plate of apples, oranges, and pears. A huge column rises in the right-hand corner to fill the void.

*Biography and
(in rest of para-
graph) its rele-
vance to the work*

The fifty-seven-year-old Mrs. Goldthwait, wife of a wealthy Boston merchant, was the mother of fourteen children; she was also a gardener noted for her elaborate plantings.³ Copley uses this fertility theme as a unifying element in his composition. All the forms are plump and heavy, like Mrs. Goldthwait herself. The

³Prown, 76.

ripe, succulent fruit, the heavy, rotund mass of the column, the round top of the table—all are suggestive of the fecundity of the sitter.

*The most obvious
characteristic of
the work*

The painting is also marked by a painstaking realism. Each detail has been carefully and accurately rendered, from the wart on her forehead to the wood grain of the tabletop to the lustrous gleam of the pearl necklace. As a painter of fabrics Copley surpasses all his contemporaries. The sheen of the satin, the rough, crinkly surface of the black lace, the smooth, translucent material of the cuffs—all are exquisitely rendered.

*"But" is transi-
tional, taking us
from the obvious
(clothing) to the
less obvious
(character)*

But the figure is more than a mannequin modeling a delicious dress. She has weight and bulk, which make her physical presence undeniable. Her face radiates intelligence, and her open, friendly personality is suggested by the slight smile at the corner of her lips and by her warm, candid gaze.

*Brief reminder of
the first work, to
clarify our
understanding of
the second work*

The rubbery limbs of Copley's early period have been replaced by a more carefully studied anatomy (not completely convincing, but still a remarkable achievement given that he was unable to dissect or to draw from nude models). There is some sense for the underlying armature of bone and muscle, especially in the forehead and hands. And in her right hand it is even possible to see the veins running under her skin.

*Further compari-
son, again with
emphasis on the
second work*

Light is also treated with far greater sophistication. The chiaroscuro is so strong and rich that it calls to mind Caravaggio's *tenebroso*. The light falls almost like a spotlight onto the face of Mrs. Goldthwait, drawing her forward from the deep shadows of the

Reassertion of
the thesis, sup-
ported by con-
crete details

background, thereby enhancing the sense of a psychological presence.

Copley's early promise as a colorist is fulfilled in mature works such as *Mrs. Goldthwait*. The rich, warm red-brown tones of the satin, the wood, and the column dominate the composition. But the painting is enlivened by a splash of color on either side—on the left by Copley's favorite aqua in the brocade of the chair, and on the right by the red and green punctuation marks of the fruit. The bright white of the cap, set off against the black background, draws attention to the face, while the white of the sleeves performs the same function for the hands.

Summary, but
not mere rehash;
new details

Color, light, form, and line all work together to produce a pleasing composition. It is pleasing, above all, for the qualities that distinguish it from contemporary English works: for its insistence on fidelity to fact, for its forthright realism, for the lovingly delineated textures, for the crisp clarity of every line, for Mrs. Goldthwait's charming wart and her friendly double chin, for the very materialism that marks this painting as emerging from our pragmatic mercantile society. In these attributes lie the greatness of the American Copleys.

Further sum-
mary, again
heightening the
thesis

Not that I want to say that Copley never produced a decent painting once he arrived in England. He did. But what distinguishes the best of his English works (see, for example *Mrs. John Montessor* and *Mrs. Daniel Denison Rogers*)⁴ is not the facile, flowery brushwork or the

fluttery drapery (which he picked up from current English practice) but the very qualities that also mark the best of his American works—the realism, the sense of personality, the almost touchable textures of the fabrics, and the direct way in which the sitter's gaze engages the viewer. Copley was a fine, competent painter in England, but it was not the trip to England that made him great.

⁴Prown, plates.

[NEW PAGE]

Works Cited

Prown, Jules David. *John Singleton Copley*. 2 vols.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Sellers, Charles Coleman. "Mezzotint Prototypes of
Colonial Portraiture: A Survey Based on the Research
of Waldon Phoenix Belknap, Jr." *Art Quarterly* 20
(1957): 407–68.

✓ Checklist for Writing a Comparison

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ☐ Is the point of the comparison clear? (Examples: to show that although *X* and *Y* superficially resemble each other, they are significantly different; or, to show that *X* is better than *Y*; or, to illuminate *X* by briefly comparing it to *Y*.) Phrases like "Despite these differences" and "A less conspicuous but still significant resemblance" are signs that critical thinking is at work, that a point is being made.
- ☐ Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- ☐ Is the organization clear? If the chief organizational device is lumping, does the second half of the essay connect closely enough with the first so that the essay does not divide into two essays? If the chief organizational device is splitting, does the essay avoid the Ping-Pong effect? Given the topic and the thesis, is it the best organization?
- ☐ If a value judgment is offered, is it supported by evidence?

6

WRITING AN ENTRY IN AN EXHIBITION CATALOG

I do not know any reading more easy, more fascinating, more delightful than a catalogue.

—Anatole France

KEEPING THE AUDIENCE IN MIND

Today most exhibition catalogs are written by specialists who ought to speak both to their colleagues and to a more general public. An exhibition catalog is not a catalogue raisonné (from the French, literally "reasoned catalog"), which is a catalog that seeks to give all the relevant factual information about every work by an artist or every work in a particular medium by an artist. Thus, in addition to commenting on each work, a catalogue raisonné seeks to record every known owner and every exhibition in which the work appeared. A catalogue raisonné is aimed at specialists such as art historians, dealers, and collectors, but an exhibition catalog is aimed at a larger audience, the museum-going public. This means that the author of an exhibition catalog should present the latest scholarship in a reader-friendly way, and indeed some authors—usually curators or academicians—succeed admirably. But many authors of exhibition catalogs fail to engage the general public, often for a simple reason: They write for themselves or for their colleagues, and they do not bother, when they draft or revise, to envision any other audience.

How else can one account for the fact that—to take a recent example, in a handsome catalog called *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium BC from the Mediterranean to the Indus* (2003)—one reads (page 281) that a "pin with flanged head" was found along with "a silver pin with pyriform head"? You don't know what "pyriform" means? (You might guess that it is related to "pyre" and "pyromaniac" and, therefore, means "flame-shaped," but this guess would be mistaken.) In this same catalog—filled with excellent illustrations of wonderful objects—you will also find that #63 in the