

History of Art
[Art humanities, HAR 180]

Museum Project #2

Formal Analysis and Comparison: Paintings

Due: Thursday, October 31

... many painters cherished in perspective a newfound key to the rationality of space, and a means of restoring man to his place in the universal harmony. A painting which uses perspective is conceived for a spectator around whom everything falls into place. It places him at the center of all representations and meanings. It enables him, certainly not to banish God – the Quattrocento was Christian – but to locate God within himself and all around him, as his own glorious possibility, scarcely tainted by sin.

Yves Bonnefoy, *The Lure and Truth of Painting*, 1995

Discuss one of the five below pairs in a five-page (maximum), double-spaced essay. Please use one-inch margins. Include the following heading: Name, date, and all identifying information for the works of art you have chosen. You need not discuss this again in the body of your essay. You should use Times New Roman font, sized 10 or 12 – no larger. Be sure to include a descriptive title for your essay.

At the beginning of your essay, make a few statements regarding the situation of each painting in the gallery in which it is displayed in dialogue with the paintings (and/or sculptures, as applies) that stand adjacent. Broadly speaking, manner of exhibition (“installation”) provides important sets of frames for the paintings you will discuss specifically.

Frame your essay with your basic thesis regarding the pair you choose, and be sure to provide a brief but careful and specific formal analysis for each of the two works before moving to the comparison/contrast format. It is important to start with the simple analysis of a single work before moving to the more complex analysis that comparison entails. Do not fail to provide a fully developed comparative analysis. This was a difficulty for many of you in the first writing assignment.

Please note the following format for citations. Citations must be used when incorporating material from the assigned reading, a guidebook, or museum labels, or any other sources:

Rembrandt’s paintings are realistic, but “realism in Rembrandt’s late works becomes realism of the spirit of inner meaning, not of surface details.”¹

Similarly:

Bartolomeo Bellano was probably a student of Donatello, and “a clear point of reference for the swaggering pose of this statuette is Donatello’s bronze nude *David* in the Bargello, Florence, probably made in the 1440s.”²

¹Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams & Prentice Hall, 1999): 791.

²*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994): 259.

The Objects

NOTE: Please choose just ONE pair for your essay, and once at the museum be sure to check the provided accession numbers against those listed on the museum cards. Otherwise, you may be studying the wrong objects. The accession number follows the acquisition date, e.g.: [1949, **49.58.2**]. The acquisition date there is bolded.

- I. Édouard Manet, *The Spanish Singer*
Oil on canvas, Salon of 1861
[1949, 49.58.2]
- Jean Antoine Watteau, *Mezzetin*
Oil on canvas, 1717-1719
[1934, 34.138]
- II. Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*
Oil on canvas, 1653
[1961, 61.198]
- Bronzino, *Portrait of a Young Man*
Oil on canvas, c. 1540
[1929, 29.100.16]
- III. Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*
Oil on canvas, 1663-1664
[1982.60.31]
- Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*
Oil on canvas, Salon of 1787
[1931, 31.45]
- IV. Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of the Faith*
Oil on canvas, c. 1660's
[1931, 32.100.18]
- Paul Gauguin, *La Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*
Oil on canvas, 1891-1893
[1951, 51.112.2]
- V. Paul Cézanne, *The Gulf of Marseilles Seen from L'Estaque*
Oil on canvas, c. 1885
[1929, 29.100.67]
- Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Forest Stream*
Oil on canvas, c. 1660
[89.15.4]

Guidelines

Adapted from a guide by Professor Lisa Vergara, Hunter, College of the City University of New York

Basic approaches when looking at paintings and graphic work

A full identification includes: artist(s), if known; subject or title; place or general region of manufacture; date of manufacture; and original location if known. If a work remains in its original location, it is considered *in situ*, and this information is a necessary part of the full identification of the painting.

What is the size of the work [always list height first]? What is its general condition? Is it whole and undamaged? A fragment? Is there surface abrasion?

What materials were used for support -- wood, canvas, cardboard, paper, etc.? Was more than one material used? Are the colors oil, tempera, watercolor, pastel? Are the colors transparent or opaque? Was the paint applied in strokes or layers, with a fine or thick brush, thickly or thinly?

Was the printing technique silver point, woodblock, intaglio [etching or engraving]? Are the lines thick or thin? What is the state of the print?

Is the general presentation abstract, non-objective, or representational?

What provides the frame, that is, the basic boundaries of the pictorial field? This does NOT necessarily involve a consideration of the physical frame. Original frames are preserved only rarely. What is the proportion of height to width? How do the dominant shapes and motifs relate to the frame [which is usually a vertical or horizontal rectangle]? Are the shapes “respected” by the frame or cropped?

How consistent is the general structure of the whole? To what degree is variety [or same-ness] present? Does the work seem spontaneous or calculated, felicitous or contrived? Is the general effect loud or intimate, monumental or trifling, solemn or lighthearted, ascetic or opulent? What are your criteria for judgments of this kind?

Is the composition simple or complex? Is it geometrically ordered or seemingly accidental? Do some forms and motifs dominate over others? Is there symmetry or not? Is the scene crowded or spacious? Is there variety or repetition, balance or lack of balance?

Is line clearly present in the work? What kinds of line are present? Are the contours of motifs clear or obscured, subservient or “assertive”? Angular or curved? If both elements are present, in what relationship and proportion?

Are there many or few individual units? Are they large or small -- both in relation to the outside world and to the pictorial area? Are shapes regular or irregular? What kinds of patterns do they create? What is the proportion of solid to “broken up” areas? Is the emphasis on central or marginal areas? Are the forms ornate, bulging or flat? If there are marginal areas, how are they treated?

Is space infinite or curtailed? To what degree is flatness/depth present? Is the emphasis on solids or voids? What type of perspective is present [linear or atmospheric]? Is the main interest of the picture near -- in the foreground -- or distant? Is “interest” evenly distributed? Is space suggested by planes in depth or recession, or by the overlapping of forms? What is the degree and kind of spatial illusion?

Is there a consistent source of light? Does it stand inside the picture, outside, or both? Does the light create strong or muted contrasts? How much shadow is present, and how does it function -- to clarify form or space, to emphasize certain parts of the picture, to create a mood?

Are the colors bright or subdued, saturated or low key? Are they “plain” or “rarefied”? Are there many colors or few [a limited or wide palette]? Is one color dominant? Are the colors warm [reds, oranges, yellows], or cool [blues, grays, greens]? Are there moderate or extreme contrasts? Does the color stand in large or small patches? Are these repetitious or echoing?

What is depicted? Beginning with the most obvious and observable motifs, take inventory of what is represented. Then, using this inventory, determine the genre to which the painting belongs: is it a portrait, still life, history painting, religious painting? Is it allegorical or the depiction of mundane, everyday subject matter? If more than one category is at work, determine the most dominant and the symbiotic relationship between the various categories.

If the human figure is represented, to which category does it belong [deity, warrior, saint, citizen, anonymous figure, etc.]? There may be a mixture of categories in a single work. If a group of figures is depicted, observe the physical and psychological relationships between the figures and the way in which the eye of the viewer is moved from figure to figure and senses a relationship [or lack thereof] between them. How are the figures placed in the pictorial field? Is the movement between them rhythmic? Patterned? Disjointed?

To what genre does the work belong?

Is the painting a portrait or group portrait? What you see in a portrait is an artistic construction and interpretation that stresses aspects important to the original audience. The primary object of your analysis is the personage that the artist has created, NOT the historical person. A portrait's primary purpose is to represent an actual historical person in such a way that s/he can be recognized by the intended audience. Through pose, gesture, costume, setting, attribute, secondary figures and the abstract properties of style [color, space, light, handling of paint, etc.] the portrait usually conveys widely shared cultural ideals of identity. Likeness is often, but not always, a goal.

How much of the figure is shown? Portraits are classified as full-length, half-length, three-quarter length, bust length.

How large is the figure within the frame? Is the figure at an angle to the picture plane, frontal, turned in space? What is the figure's relationship to the spectator? Consider gaze, gesture, facial expression -- is the figure aloof or engaged with the spectator? .

What is the background or setting? What attributes are included? Is there any indication of trade, profession, class, family relationship?

Is the painting a figural scene? What subject does the painting represent? Is the action quiet, or full of physical movement? Are there many figures or a few, and are they small or large in relation to the size of the picture? Are they full length or cropped? What is the setting? What role does it play? Is the main action obvious or obscured?

Is the scene a history painting [from the Italian word *istoria*, which means story or narrative]? In Western art theory from the Renaissance to the 19th century, history painting has generally been regarded as the most challenging, and by extension the most important, kind of painting. Stories are usually drawn from the Bible, the lives of the Saints, classical history, and mythology. Consider the telling of the story through figural poses, facial expressions, setting, attributes, and the abstract structure of the painting itself.

Is the scene a landscape? What is the general character of the landscape -- attractive, forbidding, calm, turbulent, spectacular, intimate? What elements determine the effect? Consider all the motifs, as well as lighting, spatial construction, and color scheme. What are the expressive qualities of these?

Consider the size of the area shown and the spectator's viewpoint. How do we visually "gain entry" into the picture, and how far can we see into the distance? What is the proportion of earth to sky, plain to elevation, water to land, open to closed areas? Are the motifs concentrated or diffused? Is the picture painted in a summary style or is it full of objectively rendered detail?

What type of place is depicted -- cultivated fields, woods, the banks of a river? Can the season or time of day be determined? What signs of human activity are included? What types of architectural elements are included? What is their thematic relationship to the site? Does it represent a specific place -- is there an identifiable town on the horizon, for example? If so, can you determine the extent of topographical accuracy?

In general, how do these formal elements create "visual interest"? And, how meaningful are these various formal elements and their organization for the reading [interpretation] of the theme?

What was the original audience for the work? Is the work an altarpiece or a private devotional image? Is it a fresco, or a public mural? Is it a cabinet picture, made for the pleasure of a select few?

What are the most likely ideas, values, sentiments, and perceptions with which the work was originally concerned? How might original function have affected the formal elements? How does the formal structure of the work of art act together with its subject and theme? Does the picture attempt to establish equivalencies between pictorial form and other cultural norms? Does it attempt to undercut or subvert the mainstream ideology of culture?

Is it possible to make reasoned observations about the intentions of the artist? Is this productive?

How might the original audience[s] have shaped the work? How might your own experiences, norms, and ideological biases affect the ways in which you view the work?