WRITING ABOUT PORTRAIT PAINTINGS:
A Discourse Analysis

Introduction

As indicated by the increasing number of college and university webpages devoted specifically to the topic of writing about Art History, there is a growing realization that writing instruction in this field should be approached differently than in fields such as Literature, History and the Sciences, or other fields in which writing instruction has been a student focus for a number of years prior. Students typically have no exposure to Art History before college, and often have only limited exposure then. The University of North Carolina's Art History "hand out" provides its students with some very broad guidelines for structuring papers. For example, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining "a logical order" throughout the text, but offers only vague instruction on writing, to wit: "summarize the overall appearance, then describe the details of the object" (UNC 2005: 2). Wesleyan University's "Art History Writing Guide" recommends dividing information into categories such as "Form," "Materials and Techniques," "Content," and "Context (including patronage and site)" (Wesleyan 2005: 4). However, this guide fails to further define these categories or comment on their order.

Despite the increased interest in teaching art-historical writing, there exist relatively few studies of art discourse. Furthermore, while the existing research and pedagogical aims focus on many features of art-historical writing in general, there is a lack of detailed analyses of the organizational structure of such discourse. Moreover, the type of evaluation inherent to art-historical writing has not been adequately defined and discussed (Tucker 2003). The websites recommend various books to students as writing aides, with both UNC (2005) and Dartmouth (2005) recommending Sylvan Barnet's "A Short Guide to Writing about Art." Barnet analyses

the organization of sample essays, although he does not define any categories of information or specific organization (1993).

This paper will analyze the organizational structure of art-historical discourse through a study of seven texts about portrait paintings written by four different art critics. Adelhaid Gealt writes about the portrait of "Mrs. Abington as 'Miss Prue'" by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and about Hyacinthe Rigaud's "Louis XIV in His Coronation Robes." Christopher Riopelle comments on Adolph Menzel's "Living Room with the Artist's Sister", Gustave Courbet's "The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet", and Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson's "Portrait of the Young Romainville Trioson." Douglas Stewart looks at the "Portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzroy with her Indian Page" by Peter Lely. Richard R. Bretell's piece is on John Singer Sargent's "The Daughters of Edward D. Boit".

The texts listed above can be found in the book *Art: The Critic's Choice*, a collection of commentaries on selected paintings from different artistic and historical eras, such as the Baroque and the Early Nineteenth Century. Each commentary is one page in length, and appears next to the painting it explains. Although written by art historians, the texts are intended for the general educated public, who may have very limited knowledge of the formal aspects of Art History.

Part I of the paper will break the information of the text into categories, followed by detailed description/definition of the categories. Part II demonstrates how this pattern might be utilized in composing an art-historical text. Part III includes more discussion of the concept of analysis in Art History, which is the subject of much debate among the field's experts.

Part I: Categories of Information and their Organization

In terms of the limited sample analyzed, art-historical writings directed at portraiture follow a distinct pattern of presentation. This pattern is readily observable in the texts of the experts mentioned above. In this Part I, categories of information present in their respective writings are identified as: GENERAL – ARTIST – SITTER – ANALYSIS. The length, content, and ordering of the categories are discussed. Examples of each category are cited to further illustrate and confirm the pattern. Finally, a few notable exceptions and ambiguities are discussed.

A. The GENERAL Category

The GENERAL category includes, as suggested by the name, broad statements related to art. The GENERAL section has different roles according to its location in the piece, usually occurring at the beginning or the end of the text. When appearing at the beginning, the general statement serves to open the piece and to guide the reader to more specific and detailed comments about the artist. This initial remark catches the reader's attention, and has the function of an introduction.

Such statements can take the form of comparisons of the artist or portrait being described to other specified artists or works of art. They may also be, or include, statements about the nature of art or artists. Some make connections between certain artistic movements and historical time periods. The following example is taken from a writing about Reynolds' 1771 portrait of "Mrs. Abington as 'Miss Prue'" (Gealt 1999: 218):

Sometimes artists achieve greatness when they are not even trying.

This example refers to one of the ways to succeed in art, and alludes indirectly to the skill of the artist and quality of the portrait in question.

A comparison of one historical era to another can be seen in the following statements, which open a piece about the 1847 portrait "Living Room with the Artist's Sister" by Adolph Menzel (Riopelle 1999: 244):

> *Today, exhibitions with eighty works of art in them are called "blockbusters." A century ago, art lovers had a longer attention span.*

Here, a general observation about present-day art exhibits is followed by a rather pointed one regarding a characteristic of modern art audiences. Both observations are made by comparison to art exhibits and viewers of the past.

GENERAL statements occurring at the end of the text are often more specific than those at the beginning. They usually deal with the historical or artistic period in the years immediately following the completion of the painting or after the artist's life. Other general comments include those made about the history of the painting (i.e., who acquired it and when), or developments in the lives of the sitters. These closing GENERAL comments are intended as conclusions. One example from Gealt's writing about Rigaud's 1701 "Louis XIV in His Coronation Robes" (1999: 196) is:

> *That modern eyes might view such values with suspicion is, ironically, a product of the very century this great icon launched.*

Whether used as introduction or as conclusions, these statements are usually brief (1-2 sentences), relatively broad, and relatively non-specific to the particular work of art or artist under study.

B. The ARTIST Category

A second category of information included in art-historical writing relates to the life and work of the artist. This information is largely historical and biographical in nature. The artist's personal and professional achievements are usually discussed. Significant life experiences or

difficulties are often noted. Following is an example from Gealt's text on "Louis XIV" (1999: 196):

> *Rigaud came to Paris in 1681 and entered the king's Royal Academy, winning the coveted Prix de Rome in 1682.*

The category may also include detailed discussions of other works by the artist, as is shown in the following example (Riopelle 1999: 244):

> *In the most ambitious painting he ever undertook, The Iron Rolling Mill of 1875… Menzel meticulously recorded the efforts of dozens of sweating iron workers in a vast, gloomy factory, their actions eerily illuminated by the molten iron itself…"*

The primary function of the ARTIST category is to acquaint the reader with the artist. A secondary function is to help frame the historical context for the portrait in question, relating the time and circumstances of its creation to other events in the life of the artist. The sentences or paragraphs which form this category narrow the topic from the broad opening and really begin the body of the composition.

C. The SITTER Category

A third category of information is that relating to the subject or subjects of the portrait, also referred to as the sitter(s). This section sets forth biographical information about the sitter. It often includes explanations relating to the commissioning of the portrait. See the following example, which describes one of the subjects, Alfred Bruyas, depicted in Courbet's 1854 work "The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet" (Riopelle 1999: 232):

> *Repeatedly, he [Bruyas] commissioned his own portrait, finally owning some thirty-five depictions of himself, including four by Courbet. They were the instruments of his intense introspection.*

Another example from this category which includes both biographical and commissioning information can be found in Stewart's piece about Peter Lely's "Portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzroy with her Indian Page" (1999: 158):

> *The picture was a royal commission, painted in 1672, when the eight-year-old sitter, the fourth child of the famous courtesan Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, and Charles II, was betrothed to ten-year-old Sir Edward Henry Lee.*

The SITTER section is usually relatively short, running one to two sentences, or one paragraph. It typically follows the ARTIST category and precedes analysis of the portrait, often acting as a bridge between the two. Information in the SITTER section often expands upon the historical context presented in the ARTIST category, setting the stage for the detailed discussion of the portrait to follow in the ANALYSIS section.

D. The ANALYSIS Category

A fourth category of information is the analysis, which is also the most important and complex of the four. The ANALYSIS section is usually where the 'point' of the text (i.e., the views of the author regarding the portrait) is explicitly expressed. This section contains description and evaluation, ultimately leading to an interpretation of the portrait. These elements are extremely difficult to define and differentiate. A separate discussion on the complex relationship between description and evaluation appears in Part III of this paper.

The descriptive part of the ANALYSIS section discusses the action, or lack there of, in the portrait. It also examines artistic elements such as form, color, technique, etc. For example, in Riopelle's analysis of Girodet's 1800 "Portrait of the Young Romainville Trioson," he states (1999: 236):

> *His curly-haired head resting in his hand, the lad turns from both his schoolwork and his pleasures, represented by the crisply delineated still-life composition on the right.*

The passage contains Riopelle's subjective impressions gleaned from the details of the painting. These impressions may be informed by information presented in the earlier sections (ARTIST or SITTER), or drawn wholly from observations of the portrait in question.

The evaluative aspect of the ANALYSIS category typically consists of conclusions drawn from descriptive elements of the portrait. Consider the following example from Gealt's "Miss Prue" (1999: 218):

> *Juxtaposing horizontal and vertical elements, accented here and there by just the right diagonals, the picture is compact, direct, and unabashed. It has an alacrity, a dynamism, and a sense of fun that represents the best of what Reynolds could achieve.*

The underlined portion of this quotation describes the painting, and serves as a basis for the evaluative conclusions of the remainder of the quotation.

An interpretation with respect to the meaning or significance of the portrait is also a feature of the ANALYSIS category. Frequently, symbolic and historical references that may not be obvious to the viewer are explained in this section. For example, in relation to the "Portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzroy", Stewart writes (1999: 158):

> The story of Bacchus and Ariadne explains the composition of Lely's picture. Lady Charlotte, while taking grapes from the Indian boy, looks out to Sir Edward Lee, her betrothed. His unseen involvement, in the role of Bacchus, completes the story.

Organization of the Categories

The categories listed above occur in a regular pattern within the seven texts that were studied. The pattern of organization of the categories can be described as follows: GENERAL – ARTIST – SITTER – ANALYSIS – GENERAL. This pattern is summarized in the following table, along with the length and function of each category.

PATTERN	***LENGTH***	***FUNCTION***
GENERAL	1 or 2 Sentences.	To introduce or open the piece.
ARTIST	1-2 Paragraphs.	To acquaint the reader with the artist. To explain context of portrait.
SITTER	1-2 Sentences, or 1 Paragraph.	To acquaint the reader with the sitter. To explain context of portrait.
ANALYSIS	1-2 Paragraphs.	To describe the portrait; discuss the action/inaction; highlight artistic elements. To evaluate the portrait based on descriptions. To offer an interpretation of the portrait's meaning.
GENERAL	1-3 Sentences.	To conclude or close the text.

Although the pattern of organization, length, function, and definition of the sections outlined above seem to be fairly consistent, there are some notable exceptions. For example, Riopelle's text about Courbet's "The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet" ends with interpretation of the portrait (i.e., in the analysis section). There are not any GENERAL statements that refer to entities unrelated to the portrait. The last sentence of the piece, as quoted below, conveys the relationship between the sitter and painter. That sentence reads (1999: 232):

As he doffs his hat in greeting to Courbet, he accepts their almost sacramental alliance.

Another exception can be seen in Gealt's piece about Rigaud's "Louis XIV", which has a paragraph about the sitter before the main biographical paragraph about the artist. Perhaps this switch was motivated by the fame and importance of the sitter. Yet another exception is that which occurs in Stewart's text on the "Portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzroy". Stewart begins the piece with biographical information about Lely, telling first his birthplace, and then identifying his father. This text is very unusual for its abrupt jump into the body of the text, with no prelude or introduction whatsoever. The reasons for this opening are unclear, although it is possible that this is nothing more than a product of the author's writing style.

Other exceptions include occurrences of mixing of the categories, wherein a few clauses or sentences seemingly belonging to one category are mixed in with another. For example, the following sentence appears in the middle of the first paragraph of Gealt's "Miss Prue" (1999: 218):

> Sitting backward in a chair, Mrs. Abington has her thumb in her mouth as she stares distractedly, yet with bright, captivating eyes, out into space.

This sentence would seem more aptly placed in the ANALYSIS section, yet it occurs in isolation as the artist is being described. It is clear the sentence has not merely been misplaced, since it functions as evidence for the characterization of Reynolds as an artist who "broke many rules" by painting his sitter "in such an unladylike and sensually suggestive pose" (Gealt 1999: 218). It should be noted that single sentences or clauses that function as another category to the one in which they are embedded, such as the above ANALYSIS example by Gealt, do not necessarily divert attention from the category as a whole.

The commentaries include stretches of text that are difficult to code, as well as the exceptions mentioned above. Consider as an example the following passage from Bretell's piece on "The Daughters of Edward D. Boit" (1999: 266):

> *Mr. and Mrs. Boit were equally at home in Paris and London as in their native Boston. Sargent knew the family well enough to paint both this great exhibition work and a formal portrait of Mrs. Boit… painted in 1887-88 when Sargent was staying at the Boit's Boston home.*

It is not clear whether the information should be assigned to the ARTIST or the SITTER category. In fact, the categorization tends to break down whenever the relationship between artist and sitter is discussed.

Another example of the ambiguous status of passages relating artist/sitter connections is apparent in the following excerpt from the discussion of Courbet's "The Meeting" (Riopelle 1999: 232):

> *Courbet quickly recognized that Bruyas was that rare patron who could appreciate even his most audacious inventions and with whom he could collaborate to actively advance his career. For these two men, art, introspection, and entrepreneurship were intermingled, and both played all the roles.*

Both Courbet and his patron, Bruyas, are characterized in the above sentences, making it difficult to separate the "intermingled" information about one from that about the other.

The divisions of the categories are not exact, meaning that not every clause and every sentence in a given paragraph or subparagraph belongs to the same category. The pattern of organization is to be viewed as a helpful guide, not as a set of unbending rules. The following table illustrates the recurrence of the pattern in the seven pieces analyzed.

Miss Prue Reynolds	**Lady Charlotte** Lely	**Louis XIV** Rigaud	**Daughters of E. Boit** Sargent	**Living Room** Menzel	**Young Romainville** Girodet	**The Meeting** Courbet
A	**B**	**A**	**A**	**A**	**A**	**A**
B	**D**	**B**	**B**	**B**	**B**	**B**
C	**C**	**C**	**C**	**C**	**C**	**C**
D	**D**	**B**	**B/C**	**D**	**D**	**B/C**
A	**A**	**D**	**D**	**A**	**A**	**D**
		A	**A**			

A = GENERAL B = ARTIST C = SITTER D = ANALYSIS

It is clear that, despite a few exceptions and variations, the pattern holds to a relatively high degree.

Part II: Using the Pattern to Organize Portrait Writing

The pattern of informational categories described in the preceding section can be used as a template to produce art-historical discourse of the type discussed in this paper. The pattern can serve as a useful tool in presenting studies of works of art, particularly portraiture. The following text represents an illustrative example of such writing about portraiture. The topic is Ed Emshwiller's 1957 portrait of Charles C. Fries. The above discussed pattern of organization is followed, and each section's content is consistent with the observations made above.

Portrait of Charles C. Fries

[GENERAL] A skillful artist uses portraiture to convey more about the sitter than mere physical appearance, and in this relatively unknown portrait, Ed Emshwiller (1925-1990) accomplishes exactly that. However, this work stands as an anomaly in Emshwiller's artistic career, as it adhered to traditional rules of art, later challenged vigorously by his Abstract Expressionist paintings. At the time this portrait was created, Emshwiller was enjoying success in the area of science fiction illustration, and his artwork appeared regularly on the covers of "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction" and "Galaxy". However, Emshwiller is primarily known for his innovations in video art, including films that broke free from the restraints of plot and dialogue.

[ARTIST] Emshwiller received formal artistic training at the University of Michigan, graduating from the School of Art & Design in 1949. During his years of undergraduate study, Emshwiller met the woman – Carol Fries – who would become his wife. Carol Emshwiller would later become a noted science fiction writer. As newlyweds, the couple spent a year in Paris studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and later lived in New York, where Emshwiller studied graphics at the Arts Student League. His filmmaking talents lead to his appointment in 1979 to the position of dean of the School of Film and Video at the California Institute of the Arts. Despite Emshwiller's busy life of study and artistic creation, he made time to paint this portrait of his father-in-law in 1957.

[SITTER] Charles Carpenter Fries (1887-1967) founded the English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Michigan, and for many years served as its director. Fries was a deeply committed scholar and professor. His enthusiasm for linguistics was accompanied by a boundless dedication to practical applications, namely the improvement of foreign language education. Developing inventive approaches to teaching and learning, Fries made his mark at the University of Michigan and left a lasting legacy in the form of the ELI.

[ANALYSIS] The portrait presents Fries as a distinguished scholar. Writing at his desk, shoulders angled slightly to the side, the image is completed by a smart bowtie and spectacles. Behind the lenses a pair of thoughtful, blue-gray eyes draws the attention of the viewer, and the beginnings of a smile soften that gaze to express an air of intelligent serenity. Fries's image manages to fill the canvas without being overly intimidating. The viewer's attention is also drawn to the rather large hands shown with a fountain pen in the act of writing. The pale blue color of the veins denote age (Fries was 69 at the time of the sitting), yet the presence of the veins themselves also indicate the strength of those hands, and thus reflect Fries's capabilities as a man of purpose and leadership.

The triangular, half-length pose, with light entering from the left, is characteristic of traditional portraiture. Contrasting colors are employed to call attention to the face and hands. The dark blue suit, murky background, and brown desk contrast dramatically with the vibrant color of the skin. Emshwiller's skills as a painter are apparent in his attention to minute detail, such as the reflection of the hand, pen and sleeve in the shine of the polished desk. The portrait has an almost photographic quality that demonstrates Emshwiller's ability to faithfully represent the physical characteristics of the sitter, while the subtle emphases on the facial features and hands communicate a sense of wisdom and accomplishment.

[GENERAL] Over the years, this portrait has hung on many walls of the ELI and currently resides in one of the conference rooms. A great contribution to the history of the ELI, and an excellent showing of artistic ability, this portrait now serves as a memorial to Charles C. Fries.

Part III: A Word About Description and Evaluation

In order to produce an effective ANALYSIS section of an art-historical composition, one must first be aware of the complexities inherent in the relationship between the description and the evaluation of works of art. Before examining this relationship, it is necessary to more carefully define the term "art history", which has been used frequently in previous sections of this paper. The term "art criticism" has been avoided until now for a few reasons. First of all, "art history" seems broader, since most colleges and universities have Art History departments. Also, due to the complexities in distinguishing between description and evaluation, the term "criticism" used earlier in the paper could have added to the confusion. However, some experts on the subject use the terms interchangeably, arguing that art history cannot exist without art criticism and vice versa (Baxandall 1985). As for a definition of art history/criticism, Tucker offers the following characterization: "verbal comment, spoken or written, on a particular work of art or particular class of artwork considered as such" (2004: 11-12).

One might suppose that description involves the more objective task of cataloguing the visual aspects of art works. According to Barnet, description "deals with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see. . . It can also comment on the execution of the work ('thick strokes of paint,' 'the highly polished surface'), but it does not offer inferences and it does not evaluate" (1993: 71). Barnet associates description with objectivity, characterizing it as free from value judgments on the part of the writer.

Tucker's elaborate characterizations of description include a simple definition of it as a "process of *specification*" of entities (2004: 12). However, as Tucker points out, description often has a more subjective aspect, as well. That is, through controlling the "process" of selecting particular features of the work for examination, choosing the words and tone used in

discussion, dictating the order of presentation, and modulating the relative emphasis placed on each, the writer can greatly impact the reader's impression of the artwork. Tucker recognizes this impact in the following quotation (2004: 2):

> *"… art-historical discourse… [employs] a mode of description aiming, not to inform the reader of rudimentary facts concerning the size, shape, colour, spatial collocation etc. of an object he/she cannot see, but to recommend a particular verbal and mental representation of an object (the work of art) which is assumed to be accessible… to observations."*

Based on the positions of Barnet and Tucker briefly outlined above, one can conclude that the writer constructs an interpretation of an artwork based on both evaluation (i.e. criticism, value judgments, etc.) *and* description. To what extent the description is evaluative is difficult to determine. However, even if the description were completely objective, it will still provide the evidence upon which the evaluation is based, and thus ultimately affect interpretation.

Conclusion

The categories described in Part I, as well as their pattern of organization, have several possible applications in an Art History classroom. They could be used as a writing template for novice art-historical writers, as demonstrated in Part II. More structured guidelines could be extremely helpful for those struggling to grasp the terminology (this includes speakers of languages other than English). The detailed definitions of the categories could be of use to advanced students, who may also benefit from an emphasis on the flexibility and variations of the pattern. The on-going debate about the role of description in analysis would be beneficial to all serious students of Art History, particularly to those new to the discipline who may have trouble distinguishing between the two concepts.

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