Artistic Formal Analysis

Formal analysis of Art

This assignment requires a detailed description of the “formal” qualities of the art object (formal here means “related to the form,” not “fancy” or “elegant”). In other words, you’re looking at the individual design elements, such as composition (arrangement of parts of or in the work), color, line, texture, scale, proportion, balance, contrast, and rhythm. Your primary concern in this assignment is to attempt to explain how the artist arranges and uses these various elements.

Usually you have to go and look at the object for a long time and then write down what you see. As you will quickly see from the page length of the assignment, your instructor expects a highly detailed description of the object. You might struggle with this assignment because it is hard to translate what you see into words—don’t give up, and take more notes than you might think you need.

Why would your instructor ask you to do this assignment? First, translating something from a visual language to a textual language is one of the most vital tasks of the art historian. Most art historians at some point describe fully and accurately their objects of study in order to communicate their ideas about them. You may already have found this tendency helpful in reading your textbook or other assigned readings. Second, your instructors realize that you are not accustomed to scrutinizing objects in this way and know that you need practice doing so. Instructors who assign formal analyses want you to look—and look carefully. Think of the object as a series of decisions that an artist made. Your job is to figure out and describe, explain, and interpret those decisions and why the artist may have made them.

Ideally, if you were to give your written formal analysis to a friend who had never seen the object, s/he would be able to describe or draw the object for you, or at least pick it out of a lineup.

In writing a formal analysis, focus on creating a logical order so that your reader doesn’t get lost. Don’t ever assume that because your instructor has seen the work, he or she knows what you are talking about. Here are a couple of options:

- summarize the overall appearance, then describe the details of the object
  describe the composition and then move on to a description of the materials used (acrylic, watercolor, plaster)
- begin discussing one side of the work and then move across the object to the other side
- describe things in the order in which they draw your eye around the object, starting with the first thing you notice and moving to the next

Some instructors want your formal analysis to consist of pure description with little or no interpretation. In this case, you should just describe your object. Others will expect you to go further and comment on the significance of what you have observed. Find out which way your

instructor wants you to write your formal analysis in your particular assignment. Most art historians include formal analysis at some point in their essays, so there are a lot of examples to look at in the textbook and other readings.