

Dr. Kristine Door

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN LOOKING AT A WORK OF ART

There are four basic parts to an analysis:

1. **Description.** what you see and know about the work
2. **Formal Analysis.** .the design of the work
3. **Interpretation** . . .the meaning of the work
4. **Conclusion** putting it all together

The following questions (not necessarily in this order) are suggested to help you research, look at, analyze, interpret and evaluate a work of art:

DESCRIPTION:

Who is the artist or architect? Give a brief background on the artist, including when and where they were born and died. What is the title or name of the work? What is the date(s) of the work's creation? At what point in the artist's career was the work produced? What is its size (example: 7'3" X 4')? Where is it located? What materials or media are employed? Were any special techniques used to make this work? What is the subject matter or theme; e.g. statue of Apollo, a landscape, a crucifixion, a church? Describe this theme if it has a textual source; e.g. Apollo is the mythical god of the sun. . . Describe the basic imagery; e.g. There are three female figures standing on a hill with the sun setting behind them.

FORMAL ANALYSIS:

For two-dimensional works:

What element or elements seem to dominate? Is color important? What colors are used? How are the colors arranged? Does the artist change the value and intensity of the colors? Do the colors affect one another? Do the colors advance and recede? Is line an important element? Are contour lines seen? Is there crosshatching? What is the implied linear activity, i.e. linear perspective? implied vertical, horizontal, curvilinear, or diagonal sense? Is there the illusion of texture? Do the materials create actual texture? Are there predominating shapes? How is the composition balanced, asymmetrically or symmetrically? Is there a focal point? How is the focal point created? Are there elements of the work that repeat? What does this repetition do to the arrangement? What elements are in contrast? How does this contrast affect the composition? How is depth created? Is it shallow or deep?

Additional points of consideration for three-dimensional:

Is the piece designed to be seen in the round or from a specific point or points? Is it part of a larger whole (e.g. sculpture on a building or monument)? How does light affect how it is seen? Is it an open or closed form?

INTERPRETATION:

It is at this point that a clarification between subject or theme and content are made. The subject may be the Crucifixion, but the content is the unique character and meaning conveyed by a certain artist, at a certain time, in a certain place, using certain materials in a certain arrangement. In part, it is a "reading" or summation of the Description and Formal Analysis. Another part of the interpretation is to discover the iconography of the work, or its "image-writing." Does the imagery present an allegorical story? Are symbols used? Are there metaphors? What does the work mean? What ideas does it put forth?

CONCLUSION:

Lastly, the writer can evaluate the work in terms of other historical models. If the work is described as French Gothic, Italian High Baroque, or Abstract Expressionist what about it distinguishes the style? How does the piece compare with other works by this artist?