

Writing an Art History Paper

By Maureen Gandy '12

Writing about art is based on the same analytical principles used for literature or history, but it requires a different approach and different observational skills. In an art history paper, we must employ a visual vocabulary and translate our visual impressions into a concrete verbal articulation. While this kind of writing can take many forms, the ultimate goals of any art history paper should be to explain the relationship between the technical form of a work and its impression on the viewer and to articulate how the visual elements work together to convey an overall effect.

There are several basic ways to write about art:

I. Formal Analysis:

A formal analysis is the fundamental form of writing about art and often the first taught in any introductory art history course. In a strict formal analysis, no other information is required besides that which you can see, and while some knowledge of the subject matter helps, your focus should be on the visual elements of a work. A formal analysis focuses on aspects like line, color, composition, and style, and describes the effect of these artistic decisions on the viewer. While any formal analysis must employ a good deal of description, it is important to remember that even a pure formal analysis must always be thesis-driven and each point should tie back to the overall interpretation of the work.

Example of a short formal analysis:

In Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist uses one point perspective, balanced composition, and vibrant primary colors to convey a sense of stability and order, thus representing the Christian narrative in the idealized, harmonious aesthetics of the Renaissance. In the foreground, a man and woman stand on either side of a central figure; their adjoining hands creating a focal point which extends back to the doorway in the horizon line. The orthogonal lines created by the tiled pavement move the viewer's eye along the same central path and emphasize the perfect perspective of the scene. The deep tones of yellow and green in the central man's clothing complement the red and blue in the woman's, and form the palette for the rest of the artwork; a simple, pure combination of colors that contributes to the sense of order. The almost perfect symmetry of the scene, as well as the relatively empty middle ground, underscores both the spiritual theme and the aesthetic values of the time.



Note how the writer balances description of the work, using a vocabulary based on knowledge of artistic techniques and visual elements, with analysis of their effect on the viewer. The thesis (in bold) provides a framework for the rest of the paragraph and acts as the driving force behind the descriptive observations.

The example above merely demonstrates the type of writing typically employed in a formal analysis and is therefore shorter and less thorough than most visual analyses. Also

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