

Writing About Art

SIXTH EDITION

HENRY M. SAYRE

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Henry M. Sayre
Oregon State University



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2

USING VISUAL INFORMATION

What to Look For and How to Describe What You See

Probably the greatest stumbling block for most people confronting the prospect of writing about art for the first time is what they take to be the specialized vocabulary of the art connoisseur, a vocabulary with which they are not conversant. Actually, the vocabulary of good art writing is relatively simple and based on common sense. What is more esoteric and sometimes totally alien to the uninitiated is the jargon of technical and period styles that has developed as a sort of shorthand descriptive tool—a rhetoric that includes words like “classical,” “baroque,” “romantic,” “modern,” and “postmodern.” If these words were not useful, they would not have the wide circulation that they do, but it is not necessary to feel comfortable with them in order to begin writing about art. They originate out of distinctions among the ways that subject matter, the more common elements of form, certain principles of composition, and questions of media are employed. Most of you are quite familiar with the less specialized vocabulary of art writing—words like “line,” “color,” “balance,” “rhythm,” “sculpture,” and “video”—and this more usual (and useful) vocabulary is far less threatening and more accessible than concepts such as “baroque.” But there are many ways in which you can use this less

specialized vocabulary to your benefit as a writer. What does it matter, for instance, that an artist employs line in a certain way, or that the elements in a painting repeat themselves in a visual rhythm?

It is important to point out here, again, that all art worth the name is a question of conscious choices. Given two points and the opportunity to draw a line between them, you can choose to draw a straight line, or a curved line, or a line that turns back on itself and meanders hither and yon until it finally ends. Your choice, which may or may not be deliberate and studied, reveals a good deal about your temperament and even about the way you approach the world in general. A work of art is a compendium of such choices. Artists, who make such choices as a matter of habit and profession, make them a good deal more deliberately than you and I. This is not to say that artists necessarily think out in advance the implications of every line they make, or every application of color. Any artist will tell you that much of what they do is intuitive. However, every artist has the opportunity to revise and redo each work, each gesture—and indeed, very often artists take advantage of that opportunity. It is probably safe to assume that what you are seeing in a work of art is an *intentional* effect, that the artist knows what he or she is doing.

A summary of the kinds of choices an artist can make follows. Any work of art involves the artist in choosing among a number of different possibilities: the *subject matter* must be decided upon; the artist must choose which of the various available *media* is best to portray or express that subject matter; in achieving the work, the artist will employ the *formal elements*, such as line and color, in the distinctive and particular ways that are part and parcel of the artist’s style or that express the artist’s intentions in a clear way; and, finally, the artist will decide how best to organize these elements into a whole by means of what we call the *principles of design* or *composition*. The following sections will give you some sense of the things you need to consider when you are trying to decide what a particular work of art might be about or why it might be significant or interesting. This is by no means a complete survey of the various media, principles of design, or formal elements that artists have at their disposal. It is simply an outline of why an awareness of them might help you learn to ask the right types of questions and then write a better essay. If you need more information about any given element or principle, you can consult any of the many authoritative art appreciation texts, where most of this material is treated in greater detail.

CONSIDERING THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE WORK

Subject matter is the sum of the identifiable objects, incidents, and iconographic or narrative references that are recognizable in a work of art. In representational painting, these references are sometimes clear, but even in representational painting, they can be obscure. **Iconography** presents a special problem. Iconographic references are symbolic conventions that are widely recognizable in a given culture: for instance, the meaning of the cross or a crown of thorns is widely known in the Christian West. But recognition of iconographic references depends upon one's familiarity with the culture at hand. A Buddhist might not understand such references at all, just as most Christians probably would not understand the iconographic significance of the different positions of Buddha's hands in sculptures representing him. Even within a given cultural tradition, the iconographic significance of various elements in works of art can be lost over time or even change. Thus, the iconographic significance of various elements in many medieval paintings is fiercely debated by scholars, for example, a dog at the feet of a lady in a Renaissance painting might represent fidelity but in a later, Baroque painting by, say, Rubens, the presence of a dog might represent our basest animal instincts.

Very often simply consulting the title will make a work's range of reference more explicit. In abstract painting, however, the title may or may not help you understand the subject matter of the work. *Full Fathom Five*, the title of the Jackson Pollock painting discussed in the next chapter (Figure 31), is very helpful indeed, but *Untitled*, the "title" of many of his later works, is far less so—except, of course, insofar as it asks us to question why he chose not to title his later works. It is possible to say of Pollock's untitled paintings that since they announce no overt reference, their subject matter might be paint—or the act of painting itself.

One of the most important things for you to remember when discussing subject matter is that it is in no way comparable to the *meaning* of the work. One of the classic examples of this distinction between subject matter and meaning was developed by Joshua C. Taylor in his handbook, *Learning to Look*. Taylor points out that Pietro Perugino's *Crucifixion with Saints* (Figure 11) and Carlo Crivelli's *The Crucifixion* (Figure 12) have the same subject matter, but the meaning that subject matter assumes in each is dramatically different. For Taylor, the Perugino "would seem to quell the possible anguish and effects of suffering which might be associated with the scene and to establish a serenity and calm, a complete relaxation of the emotional and physical forces which might be expected to operate in connection with such a subject matter." In contrast, in the Crivelli there "is no rest, no calm, or contemplation. Instead we take upon

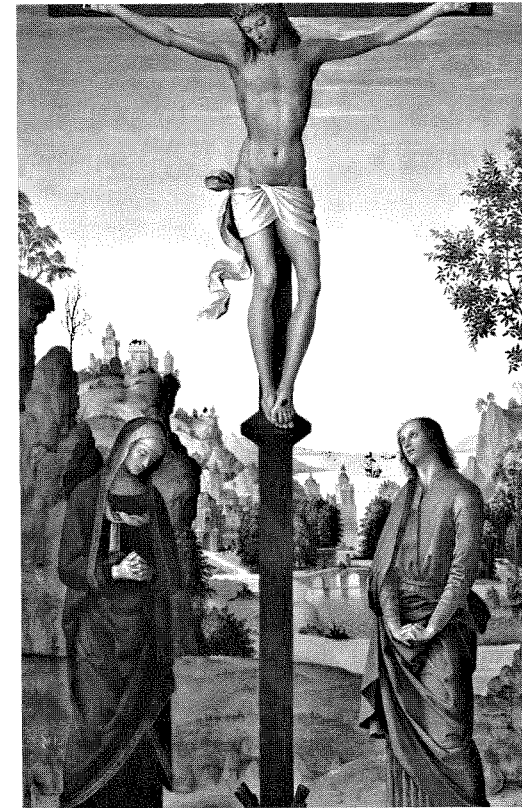


Figure 11 Pietro Perugino, *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Jerome, and Saint Mary Magdalene* (central panel), c. 1485. Oil on panel transferred from wood to canvas, 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. $\times$ 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

ourselves the anguish and physical hurt which seem to motivate the actions of the figures. And nowhere is there escape, no point on which our attention can fix itself to bring order to our excited emotions."¹ There are many structural and formal reasons for this difference—and Taylor's analysis occupies ten pages of text—but it should be sufficiently clear that whatever meaning these works possess, it is independent of subject matter. It is as if one artist sees in the scene the promise of salvation hereafter, whereas the other sees the misery of our life on earth in the here and now.

One of the most common mistakes student writers make is to confuse subject matter with meaning. A typical sentence describing one of these paintings might read: "Perugino [or Crivelli, take your pick] has painted a crucifixion, with all that implies." The assumption here is that the meaning of the crucifixion is clear, but such assumptions often stymie the

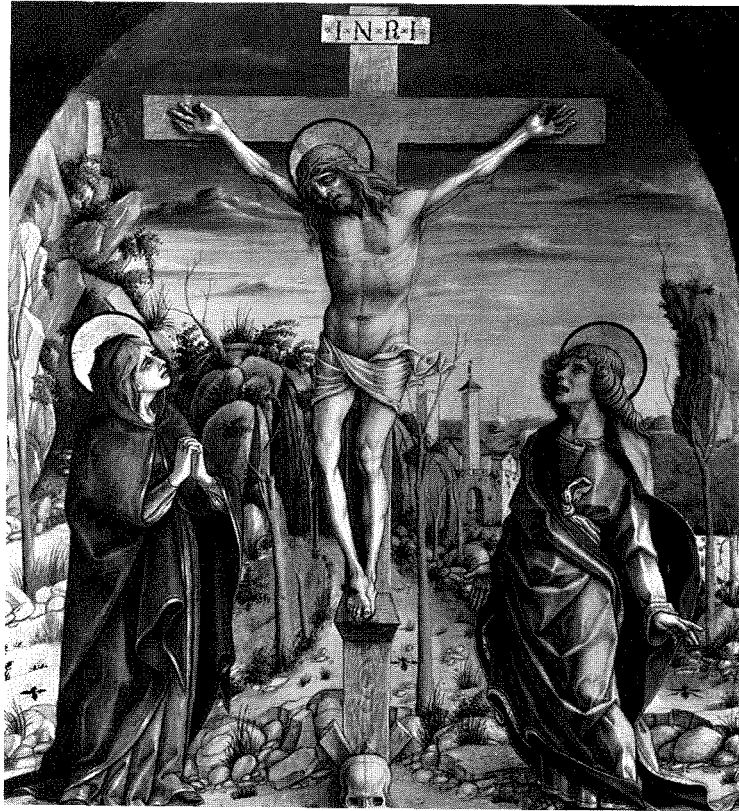


Figure 12 Carlo Crivelli, *The Crucifixion*, c. 1480–1490. Tempera on panel, 29½ in. × 21¼ in. Wirt D. Walker Fund, 1929.862. The Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

development of ideas. The crucifixion may imply something very specific to the student writer, but Taylor's point is that the crucifixion implies something entirely different to each painter, and that implication may or may not coincide with what the writer feels about the same subject matter.

One way to assess the meaning of a given work, then, is to try to imagine other handlings of the same material. It should follow that one of the best ways to write an essay about Perugino's *Crucifixion* is to *compare* it with Crivelli's. From the differences between the two we are able to recognize some of the important decisions that Perugino made and thereby learn a great deal about his intentions.

Or imagine a painting of a red barn in a green field. What does it matter that it is bathed in sunlight? What is the effect of the startling color contrast between red and green, and how would the same scene feel

handled monochromatically as a winter scene, in the snow, at dusk? Does it matter that the barn is silhouetted against the summer sky and that your point of view is relatively low? Does it make a difference that its lines and angles are clearly delineated? Would it seem less appealing, more lonely and foreboding, if it melded into the landscape and shadows? In short, given just such a set of questions and a broad enough selection of barn paintings, a reasonably significant essay on American attitudes toward landscape could probably be written. Similarly, art historians will often illustrate the difference between two stylistic periods or schools by comparing works of similar subject matter but distinctive handling. Even particular phases within an individual artist's career can be understood by means of this device. What, for instance, are the obvious differences in handling between the two versions of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* by Paul Cézanne that appear later in this chapter (Figures 24 and 25), the second of which was painted nearly twenty years after the first? Don't you suppose that this difference tells you something about Cézanne's intentions?

Thus, while subject matter (or the lack of it, in a nonobjective painting) is the most readily apparent aspect of the work, it is also, by itself, one of the least useful in discussing the work's meaning. Rather than asking yourself what the subject matter of a particular work is, ask yourself, "What does the artist think of his or her subject matter?"

What artists think of their subject matter will be revealed in their handling of the various formal elements, the way they employ the principles of composition, and their choice of medium.

DESCRIBING THE FORMAL ELEMENTS YOU DISCOVER IN THE WORK

Line

A line is any relatively narrow, elongated mark. It is the primary means we have for defining visual form, and it stands to reason that it is one of the most important elements to be considered in preparing to write about a work of art. The difference in its use in the Perugino and Crivelli *Crucifixions* probably accounts, more than anything else, for the difference in meaning that we detect in these works. In the Perugino, line is determined largely in relation to the strong vertical and horizontal axes defined by the cross itself. Working off these axes are a series of isosceles triangles, the most obvious of which is defined by the relative positions of the heads of the Virgin Mary and St. John at the two bottom corners, and Christ's head at the apex. The apex and central axis of each of the composition's other triangles remain constant, but a wider, higher triangle can be

seen stretching across Christ's feet, each side defined by the trees left and right; another is defined by the outside legs of Mary and St. John, their toes pointing to the bottom corners of the triangle, and another by the almost perfectly balanced sweep of their garments across their legs. A smaller, more precise set of triangles can be seen emanating from the diamond shape of the cross at Christ's feet. Most subtle of all, this pattern is repeated in the folded fingers of both the Virgin and St. John. The curvilinear features of this painting, from the disposition of St. John's arms to the arched bridge in the background, seem to wrap around this triangular structure in the same manner that a circle fits neatly around an equilateral triangle.

In contrast, and although the cross divides the canvas more or less along the same geometric axes as in the Perugino, not a single line in the Crivelli seems to work in harmony with any other. If line seems to function in a more or less centripetal way in the Perugino, it is centrifugal in the Crivelli, as if erupting from the scene. Most tellingly, the painting's lines all seem to fall away from the central axis. Both the Virgin's and St. John's head tilt back rather than in toward the path of their gaze. St. John's hand points away from the scene. The effect is not unlike the curious sense of disorganization achieved by Courbet in his *Burial at Ornans* (Figure 10). Despite the strong horizontal order achieved in Courbet's grouping, especially in relation to the landscape behind, and the verticality of the figures (a horizontal and vertical structure emphasized, as it often is in Western art, by the crucifix rising over the scene), Courbet fragments the composition by having each gaze—including the dog's—turn in a different direction. There is no *focus* to the scene. Implied lines of sight explode in every direction away from the supposed center of attention, the burial itself. Similarly, in the Crivelli the nervous fractures of the cliff at the painting's bottom serve to create a general sense of linear disorder that stands in stark contrast to the linear regularity and harmony of the cross, let alone the balance of the Perugino. This disorder is emphasized especially by the curved crack that seems to emanate from the skull, together with the clutter of linear detail in the painting—tufts of grass here and there, tree limbs reaching every which way.

To emphasize this difference, Taylor contrasts the treatment of St. John in both paintings. In the Crivelli, he notes,

the vertical structure-line of the figure [i.e., the fact that he is standing up in a more or less vertical way] has little meaning with regard to the effect of the whole, because the diagonal lines of his cloak are so strong that they destroy all possible sense of a vertical compact mass. And consider the nature of the lines themselves. Every curve is flattened and broken so that the line seems to struggle to reach its destination. Furthermore, if we isolate the line of the

cloak, we see that far from suggesting the balanced arc of a circle, it seems rather like the lash of a whip. And this eccentric line is repeated throughout, in the robe of the Virgin, in the rocks, and even in the body of Christ. How contrasting with this is our scheme of the St. John of Perugino. The lines of the Perugino seem to wrap themselves together into a smooth-planed volume, while those of the Crivelli disperse into the air.²

Even more than in the figure of St. John, the difference between the two paintings is manifest in the way that each recessional plane in the Perugino is clearly outlined, the landscape receding into the distance in a reasonable and logical way, while in the Crivelli the landscape seems hopelessly confused. Notice, in the Crivelli, how the drapery on Christ's right leg sweeps in a continuous line into the landscape beyond, how the tree, which must be some distance behind him, seems to catch the drapery in the wind, and how another tree behind St. John seems to merge into the cliff across the bay. In contrast, each plane in the Perugino is distinct. Line seems to serve a regulatory function. It is as if line preserves the integrity of the space it describes in the Perugino, whereas in the Crivelli it violates that integrity, disrupting our sense of organization, order, and harmony.

Shape and Space

It should be obvious, from the previous discussion, that one of the primary functions of line is to describe shape and space. One of the first questions to ask yourself about a work of art is *how* do its lines describe shape and space? In a consistent and orderly way? Or in an apparently disruptive, even random way?

Normally, shape and space are defined in consistent and accessible ways, although the lines operating to define these elements may not always be immediately obvious to you and may achieve very complicated effects. But if you learn to see these lines in the first place, and the shapes or spaces they describe, you can begin to come to grips with other, more complicated effects achieved by the artist. When you first look at Claude Monet's *Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris* (Figure 13), for instance, you may not notice the diamond-shaped space that defines the center of the composition. Its top is defined by the roof of the train station, and its bottom is delineated by two implicit or compositional lines that meet in the hazy locomotive in the center distance and that run along the tops of the two closer locomotives on each side of the center track. The area is very interesting because it seems to describe both shape—a two-dimensional diamond on a flat plane—and space—the airy volume of the train station itself. In fact, the bottom two lines are achieved by Monet's reference to the traditional laws of *mechanical perspective*, the geometric system of compositional lines perfected in the Renaissance for rendering the illusion

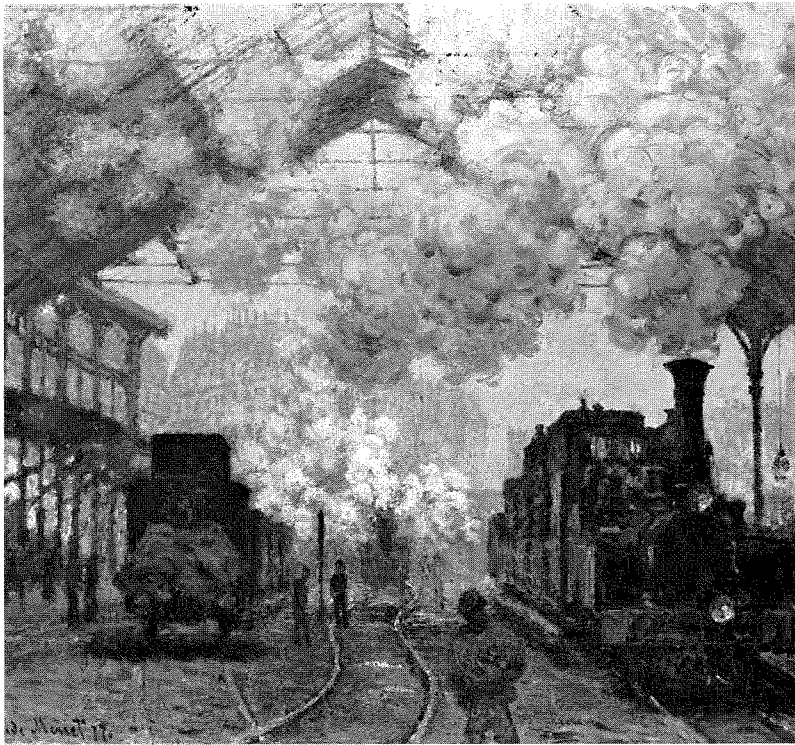


Figure 13 Claude Monet, *Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris: The Arrival of a Train*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. $\times$ 40 in. Courtesy of The Harvard University Art Museums. Bequest, Collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906. 1951.53.

of three-dimensional space. Often imaged as a road (or set of railroad tracks!) disappearing into the distance, traditional perspective is based on the observation that parallel lines seem to converge toward a common point in the distance, referred to as the *vanishing point*. In the Monet, the tops (and bottoms) of the trains converge on a hypothetical vanishing point that exists directly across from our point of view, somewhere behind the distant central locomotive. The serpentine central railroad tracks would also converge on this point if they were straightened out.

Thus, the bottom of the diamond shape is composed of two lines that define three-dimensional space, while its top is composed of the two lines that define the two-dimensional edge of the roof. Monet seems to be willfully playing off the illusion of three-dimensional space against the actuality of the two-dimensional surface of the canvas (paintings are, after all, two-dimensional planes), a sense of play that the curvilinear railroad tracks emphasize since they seem to be themselves a joke on the traditional

representation of the laws of perspective. Why would Monet want to do this? Would it surprise you to discover that he was interested in drawing our attention not only to his choice of subject matter, but to his handling of it as well? Doesn't it make sense that he might want you to consider the surface of the canvas as a composition of effects to be enjoyed in their own right? His style of painting was as new in 1877 as the steam locomotive itself, and we move between them, the subject and its handling, in much the way that our eye moves between the two-dimensional design of the surface and the three-dimensional representation of space.

While Monet does not quite say that the design of the composition is more important than its subject matter, it is quite clear that, along with a number of his contemporaries, he initiates a logic that will eventually argue just that. Franz Kline's *Mahoning* (Figure 14), painted in 1956, almost eighty years after the Monet, has made that very step. Here the canvas is all surface; there is no illusion of depth; there is only a criss-crossed tangle of broadly painted lines. This is a very difficult type of painting for most students to talk about because it seems to have no



Figure 14 Franz Kline, *Mahoning*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 6 ft. 8 in. $\times$ 8 ft. 4 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchased with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Steven Sloman. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

subject matter. If you consider, however, that one of its primary objectives might be to free the painted surface of the necessity of representing three-dimensional space, then you might discover that you have something to say after all. Like Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five*, discussed in the next chapter (Figure 31), the painting is about *painting* itself, the act of painting.

In the late 1940s, Kline had projected a number of his representational drawings onto a wall. So magnified, they seemed to him to capture a sense of dynamic tension that mirrored the force and energy of the modern world. Mahoning is, in fact, the name of a township in Carbon County, Ohio, very near to where Kline grew up in Lehigh, an industrial city in the heart of Pennsylvania's coal country. As a child, Kline was surrounded by factories, foundries, and, especially, the trestles and rails of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, which carried anthracite coal down the valley and was the city's largest employer. *Mahoning* does not represent the industrial landscape of Kline's youth, but it does *suggest* it. In the broad strokes of his brush on canvas, one senses the furious activity of industrial America.

Light and Dark

Kline did not think of his painting as black lines on a white ground. "I paint the white as well as the black," he said, "and the white is just as important."³ The tension between black and white—that is, between opposites, light and dark—is one of the primary sources of the sense of energy that Kline's canvases evoke. But Kline also understands that in addition to the traditional systems of geometric perspective, one of the primary ways to evoke the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane in painting is by imitating the effects of light as it falls on three-dimensional surfaces. His painting, in effect, violates that expectation, and as a result, turns its back on the representation of three-dimensional space.

Gradual shifts from light to dark across the same surface generally indicate that you are looking at a rounded or contoured form. Georgia O'Keeffe's charcoal drawing of *Alligator Pears in a Basket* (Figure 15) is an almost classic example of this modulation, ranging from the darkest blacks in its shadowed areas, through shadings of gray, to areas of white where an intense light strikes directly off the foremost surface of the pears or off the back of the basket itself. This technique of creating the sense of a rounded surface by means of gradual shifts and gradations of light and dark was perfected in Renaissance Italy, where it came to be known as *chiaroscuro*. In Italian, *chiaroscuro* means light (*chiaro*) dark (*oscuro*)—and

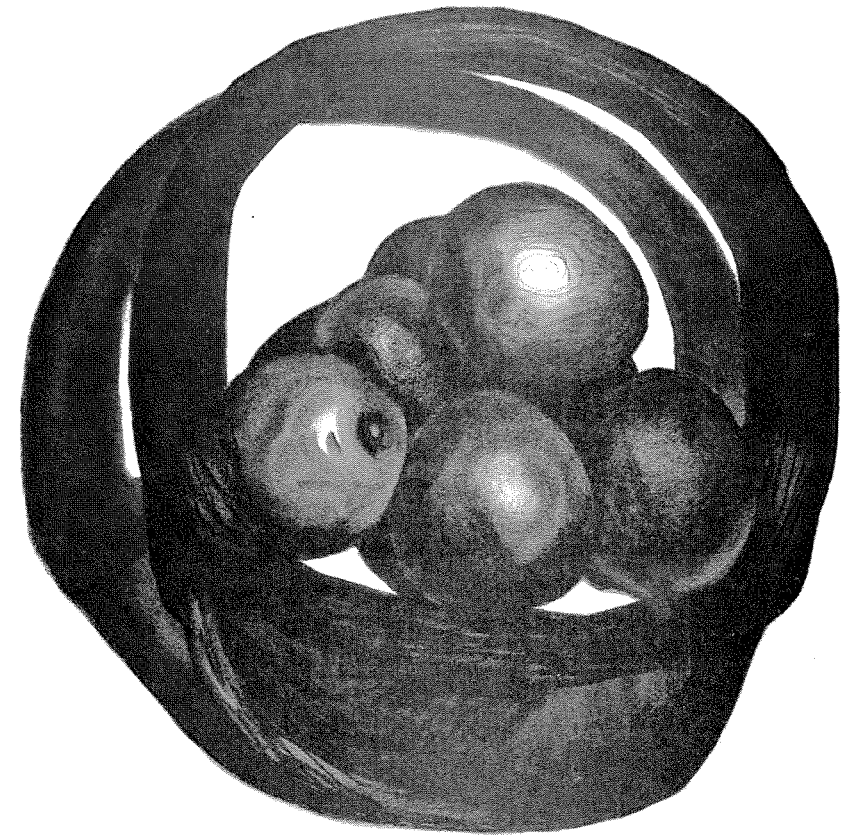


Figure 15 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Alligator Pears in a Basket*, 1923. Charcoal on paper, 24 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. $\times$ 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay. © 2005 The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

notice how language here reflects technique, as the end of the first word melds into the beginning of the second, creating a seamless transition between "light" and "dark."

The relative level of lightness or darkness of an area or object is traditionally called its relative **value**. That is, a given area or object can be said to be darker or lighter in value. In O'Keeffe's *Alligator Pears*, the areas of the pears closest to the source of light are lighter in value than those farther away. These areas, which directly reflect the light source and which are indicated by white, are known as *highlights*. Highlights are often left "blank," revealing the unmarked paper or canvas beneath. As the object moves through the shadings of gray to dark black, different depths of shadow are evoked. Darker even than any shading on the object itself is its *cast shadow*, seen here at the bottom left. Note that just above the

cast shadow, at the bottom of the basket, is an area of light gray. This is an area of reflected light, cast indirectly from the table on which the basket rests, lightening the underside of the shadowed surface.

The revelation of form and space through chiaroscuro and shifts in value is one of the primary techniques of printmaking, used to great effect in Käthe Kollwitz's etching *The Downtrodden* (Figure 16). Perhaps more than any other printmaker in history, with the possible exception of Rembrandt and Goya, Kollwitz was able to manipulate contrasts of light and dark to create highly dramatic and emotional images. In this etching, the figures barely emerge from a shroud of darkness. Only the edge of the father's hand, which hides his face in the upper right corner of the composition, and the angelic face of the dead child in the lower left corner are fully lit. Between these poles of light, poles of innocence and despair, the



Figure 16 Käthe Kollwitz, *The Downtrodden*, 1900. Etching and aquatint on paper, 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. $\times$ 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

mother reaches down, letting the child's hair fall between her fingers. Just above, the father's hand reaches out aimlessly. And the mother's face, realized in a powerful middle-tone gray, displays an extraordinary range of emotion, at once infinitely sad and ultimately tired. It is as if Kollwitz's gray has become the very color of bitterness and resignation.

Sometimes you will encounter works of art that employ little or no contrast between light and dark. The light seems uniform throughout. If the drama in Kollwitz's etching is palpable, minimal contrasts of light and dark usually have the opposite effect. A work of art that seems uniform in tone, such as Perugino's *Crucifixion*, usually evokes feelings of calm and harmony.

Color

Though it is easier to think of questions of light in terms of black and white, the same rules apply to color as well. Think, for instance, of the difference between pink and maroon: one is red saturated with white and the other is red saturated with black. When we refer to someone who wears a lot of pastels, we mean someone who dresses in colors light in value. It is not hard to imagine a painting of a red ball that moves in value from a white highlight to a black shadow through all the various tints and shades of red (the color that results from adding white to a pure hue is called a *tint* of that hue, and the color that results from adding black to the hue is called a *shade*).

Yet color functions in works of art in terms more complicated than just those of light and dark. In fact, in the same way that black and white can be considered opposites, each color has its opposite number as well. These opposites are called *complementary* colors. Complements are pairs of colors that, when mixed together in almost equal proportion, create neutral grays, but that, when standing side by side, as pure hues, seem to intensify and even contradict one another.

The traditional color wheel (see the back cover) makes these oppositions clear. Each primary color—red, yellow, and blue—has, as its complement, a secondary color—green, violet, and orange, respectively. Thus, the standard complementary pairs are red/green, yellow/violet, and blue/orange (and, obviously, the intermediate hues have complementary opposites as well—the complement of red-orange is blue-green, for instance). Furthermore, just as gray moderates between black and white—as white becomes gray with the addition of black and vice versa—each color gradually moderates into the hue of its neighbor with the addition of its neighbor. Thus, the more yellow one adds to green, for instance, the more yellow-green the color becomes. Neighboring colors on the color

wheel are called *analogous* colors. Unlike complementary pairs, which create a sense of contradiction or opposition to one another, analogous pairs usually seem to rest harmoniously beside each other. The analogous blue-green-violet relationships are commonly referred to as *cool*, and red-orange-yellow combinations are said to be *warm*, or even hot.

Color theory is a vastly complicated field—one that is hardly settled, even among physicists—and the scheme described above is a vast oversimplification of the ways in which colors interact. (If you wish to explore color interactions more fully, try to locate Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color*, originally written in 1963, but reissued in 1993 in an interactive CD-ROM edition by the Yale University Press. Here you can have hands-on experience manipulating and experiencing the properties of color in a simple, easily accessible format.) Nevertheless, in writing about art, it is important to understand the basic complementary and analogous groupings because a great many works depend upon them to some degree in order to achieve their effects.

Much of the power of Vincent van Gogh's work depends upon his use of complementary color schemes. In a letter to his brother Theo, he described his famous painting *The Night Café* (Figure 17) in the following terms:

In my picture of the "Night Café" I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad, or commit a crime. I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood-red and dark yellow, with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens in the figures of little sleeping hooligans in the empty dreary room, in violet and blue. . . . The white coat of the patron, on vigil in a corner, turns lemon-yellow, or pale luminous green.

So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low wine-shop, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace of pale sulphur. . . . It is color not locally true from the point of view of the stereoscopic realist, but color to suggest the emotion of an ardent temperament.⁴

The color scheme, especially the contrast between the complements red and green, is meant to suggest the tension of the scene, the sense that beneath the surface an almost violent energy or fury is about to erupt. Things do not go together here, either literally or pictorially.

In a painting such as Pablo Picasso's *Woman with Book* (reproduced on the back cover), virtually the full range of complementary contrasts is employed. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the painting seems to be unified in its overall effect. Except for the presence of a profile that does not seem to be her own in the mirror behind the seated woman—an image that suggests

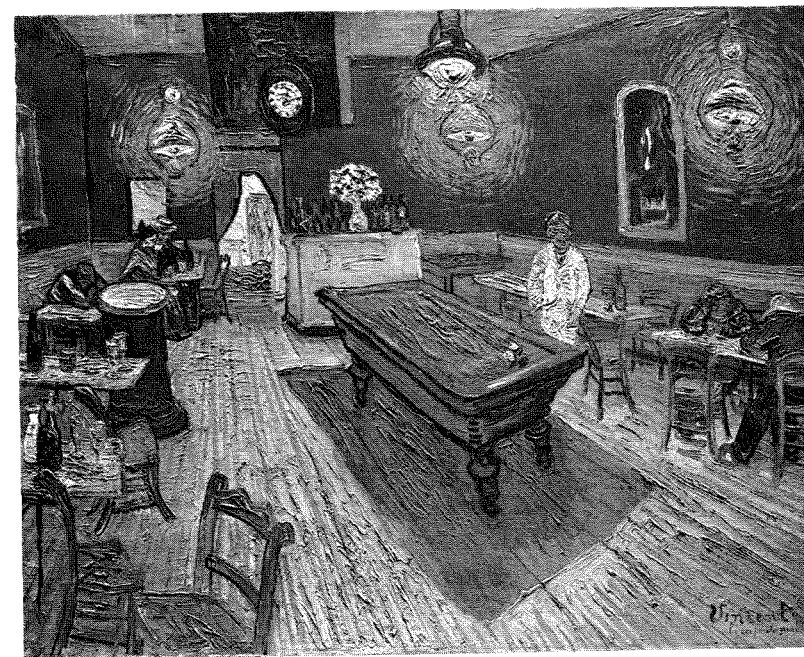


Figure 17 Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 28½ in. × 36 ¼ in. Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903. 1961.18.34. Photograph by Joseph Szaszai.

an intruder or an unseen observer, perhaps the painter himself—nothing of the tension and turmoil of van Gogh's painting seems to inform our vision. Rather, we observe a woman in meditation, gazing vacantly up from her book, daydreaming. Picasso's painting, as opposed to van Gogh's, is not a nightmare, but a reverie.

This is surely the result, in part, of Picasso's subject matter: His model is Marie-Thérèse Walter, who was also his mistress. But it is also a result of the fact that he is trying to make contrasting elements work together in harmony. Just as he has rendered the face of Marie-Thérèse simultaneously in both profile and three-quarters view, just as he made her seem at once fully clothed and half-naked, Picasso's sometimes stridently discordant colors here manage to coexist. It is apparent from the blackness outside the window to the left that it is night, and the darkness outside contrasts strongly to the brightness inside. Notice how the shadowed side of Marie-Thérèse's face is rendered in green and violet and how these two colors dominate the darker, cooler side of the painting. On the other side of the painting, the warm red glow of the chair, its orange back topped by the yellow frame around the mirror, seems almost to generate heat. It is as

if Picasso has realized here something of which van Gogh only dreamed. In the same letter to his brother Theo in which he described the color effects of *The Night Café*, he claimed that he was always in hope of expressing “the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones.”⁵

Neither Picasso nor van Gogh is interested in representing the precise color of the scene. The Impressionists had freed painting of the necessity of representing *local* color (that is, the color we “know” a thing to be in the sense that we “know” trees are green) and chose to represent the *optical* color of what they saw (in the sense that a hill covered with “green” trees will appear to be blue in the distance). Picasso and van Gogh have gone even further. “Colors, like features,” Picasso would later write, “follow the changes of the emotions.”⁶ As opposed to van Gogh’s, however, Picasso’s emotions here run toward the loving and affectionate. One of the most widely known books of Picasso’s day was an occult classic, first published in 1901, called *Thought-Forms*, written by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater. It contains a “Key to the Meaning of Colors” outlining which emotions are connected to which colors, and not surprisingly, mint green, the color of Marie-Thérèse’s hair, is the color of “sympathy,” and violet, the other color that dominates her face, suggests “love for humanity.” More precisely, violet is “a mixture of affection and devotion . . . and the more delicate shades of [it] invariably show the capacity of absorbing and responding to a high and beautiful ideal.”⁷ Picasso might not have read the book, but its classifications were so popular that he almost could not have escaped them, and, evidently, they are at work here.

It should be clear, however, even from this brief discussion, that different artists use color in different ways. Yellow may be “sulphurous,” as it was to van Gogh, but to someone else it may suggest the “highest intellect”—the meaning, in fact, given it by Besant and Leadbeater. Combinations of complementary colors may create tension in a painting, or they may be harmonized. Analogous color schemes often create a unified effect, but just as often that sense of unity can transform itself into a feeling of monotony. Meaningful discussions of an artist’s use of color must often rely on a context greater than the individual work—as I have relied on the artist’s own words, in the case of van Gogh, and upon intellectual history, in the case of Picasso.

As a writer, you must always be aware of the fact that the associations you have with a particular color are not universal. If you hear “red,” you may think “roses” and “love,” while the next person thinks “blood”

and “anger,” while the next person thinks “communism.” If van Gogh’s lines seem violent and disruptive, for instance, this impression would support your notion that he is employing complementary colors in order to create a sense of disunity and chaos. Ask yourself, how does the artist employ color and what does it mean? *But then ask yourself*, do other things about the composition support this reading?

Other Elements

There are a number of other formal elements that might be important for you to consider. What, for instance, is the *texture* of the work? If it is uniformly smooth, does this smoothness contribute to a sense of harmony? Consider van Gogh’s *Night Café* again. Doesn’t the thickness of the brushstroke, its very assertive and gestural presence, express his emotional involvement in the scene at the café?

Another formal element, one not quickly associated with art, is time. Time becomes a factor in sculpture when we find ourselves walking around or through it. Sculpture changes as the light changes, in the play of light and shadow across the surfaces of the work. This must have been the effect of the great free-standing sculptures that once adorned the pediment of the Parthenon in Athens. One of the surviving fragments of the east pediment, which originally depicted the birth of Athena, is the so-called *Three Goddesses* (Figure 18). Slightly larger than lifesize, the sculpture stood on a three-foot-deep platform over fifty feet above the ground. As the sun moved from directly in front of it to its apex at noon,



Figure 18 Phidias and workshop, *Three Goddesses*, from the east pediment of the Parthenon, c. 435 B.C. Marble, height of center figure 5 ft. The British Museum, London.

the detailed folds of the draperies, falling across the highly defined bodies of the goddesses, would have made the sculptures almost seem to move and come to life. The sculptor—or at least the sculptor overseeing the work, since he was in charge of the entire sculptural program at the Parthenon—was the famous Phidias (c. 490–430 B.C.). He was renowned for his ability to recreate the human form in a convincing way. Sculpture, to him, was a dynamic, rather than static, medium. It was active rather than passive. It seemed to be alive.

Even abstract contemporary sculpture can achieve something of the same effect. The garden Isamu Noguchi designed for the museum dedicated to his work in Long Island City, Queens, is a dynamic space (Figure 19). In Japanese gardens, each of the stone sculptures is believed to be connected to the others, as if each were rising out of the great mass of the earth's core. We enter a garden, we recognize that we are “floating” on the world beneath. As we move through it, the garden changes. As Noguchi himself describes it: “Its viewing is polydirectional. Its awareness is in depth. With participation of mobile man all points are centered. Without a fixed point of perspective all views are equal, continuous motion with continuous change.”⁸ Noguchi also feels that the stones in a garden

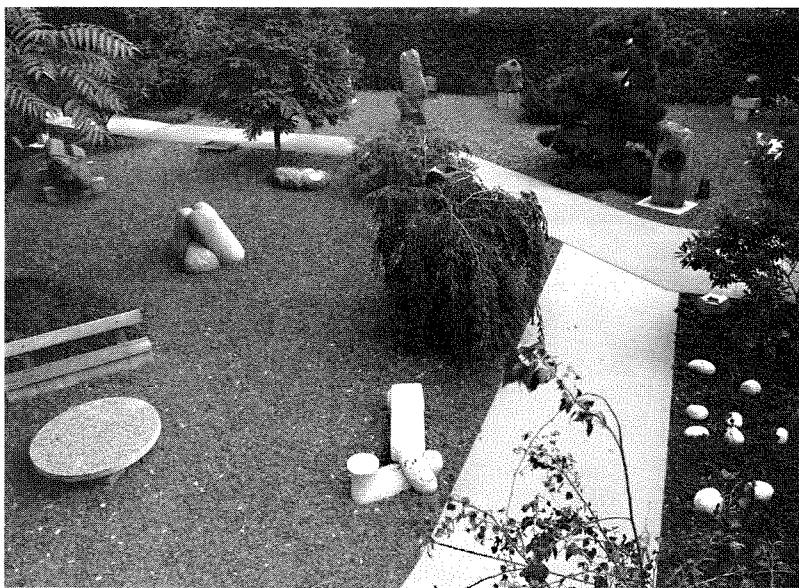


Figure 19 Isamu Noguchi, Sculpture Garden, Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Long Island City, Queens, New York, 1987. Published with the permission of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc. © 2005. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Shigeo Anzai.

embody a sense of time comparable to human time: “Their weathering seems to coincide . . . with our own sense of historical time. . . . There is a time passage to stone not unlike our own. A mellowing takes place.”⁹ Thus in the garden we experience time in its vast geological sense (through the stones’ connection to the earth mass below), in terms of the span of human life, and in “real” time, as we walk through the garden in the present moment itself.

Time entered the domain of art in radically new terms with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century. Photography seems to convey the essence of a particular time and place, and this aura of authenticity, together with its sense of instantaneous vision, of the moment itself captured forever, constitutes a large part of its appeal. Today, it is apparent that the dialogue between the present moment of our seeing the photograph—our actual experience of it in “real” time—versus the way in which the photograph seems to embody, or make present, something long lost or far away, has revolutionized our sense of time and space.

But it is important to recognize that the photograph is composed of the same elements as the other arts. The photographer Henri-Cartier Bresson described the photographic process in the following terms:

We must place ourselves and our camera in the right relationship with the subject, and it is in fitting the latter into the frame of the viewfinder that the problems of composition begin. This recognition, in real life, of a rhythm of surfaces, lines, and values is for me the essence of photography. . . . We compose almost at the moment of releasing the shutter. . . . Later you can amuse yourself by tracing out on the photo the geometrical pattern, or spatial relationships, realizing that, by releasing the shutter at that precise instant, you had instinctively selected an exact geometrical harmony, and that without this the photograph would have been lifeless.¹⁰

Cartier-Bresson called this the “decisive moment.” Thus, the leaping man in his 1932 photograph *Gare St. Lazare* (Figure 20) is suspended above his own reflection, which creates a sense of balance in the photograph. But his leap is also reflected on the circus poster on the wall behind him, just as the semicircular arched back of the poster figure is echoed in the semicircular form in the foreground water. In fact, the reflection in the water eerily mirrors the poster on the wall.

Two other art media—video and film—rely even more on time. One of the traditional distinctions among the arts has been that the plastic arts—painting, drawing, and sculpture—are *spatial* media, while the other arts—dance, music, literature—are primarily *temporal* and *linear* in nature. Video and film are both.

Most of us think of video in relation to commercial television. However, many video artists purposefully manipulate the medium in order to



Figure 20 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Gare St. Lazare, Paris*, 1932. Magnum Photos Inc. © 2002 Henri Cartier-Bresson.

distinguish what they do from the television we habitually consume. The most common difference, again, is the medium's relation to time. Standard television time is based upon the length of the commercial—10, 30, 60, and, less commonly, 120 seconds in duration. As David Antin has pointed out in a detailed analysis of the medium, there is really no difference between commercial time and the structure of time in television programs generally. A news "story," for instance, generally fits into this same time scheme, and a baseball game is a succession of pitches, hits, and catches that fit the same pace.¹¹ Video artists often ignore this pace completely, so to a viewer expecting "television," their work usually seems boring. Very commonly, the camera is held in one position, for as long as an hour. In this way, other aspects of the medium that are generally ignored, such as the peculiar way that video represents and distorts deep space, are foregrounded.

Video artists also commonly create installations in which the viewer encounters the medium as part of a larger, sculptural space. Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* (Figure 21), for instance, contrasts the stillness of a single image of a mountain shown on a small monitor in a cubicle at the center of the room (a space comparable to the "meditative"

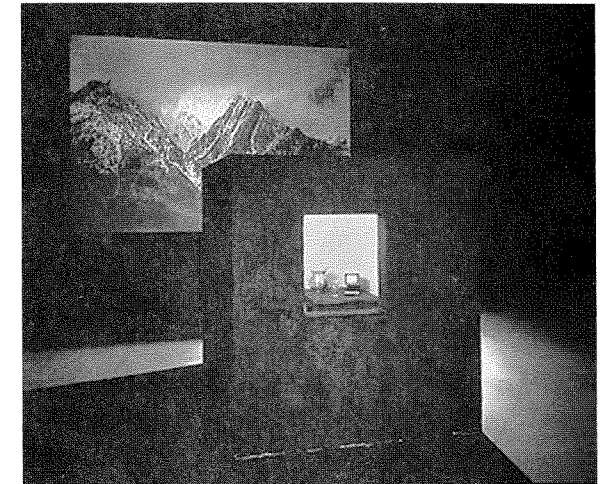


Figure 21 Bill Viola, *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983. Video and sound installation. © Bill Viola. Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo by Kira Perov/Sauidds and Nunns.

space of St. John) and a video projection of large snow-covered mountains, shot with a hand-held camera in wild, breathless flights of movement. The world "outside," in other words, contrasts with the world "within."

Perhaps one of the best ways to think of film, which can reproduce space in ways far more sophisticated than can video, is as an assemblage of various spatial and temporal points of view. The fade-in and fade-out, flashback and flashforward, closeup and longshot, and even the multi-image screen, all combine to produce film's many, sometimes startling visual effects. This multiplicity of visual techniques combines with the more purely temporal means of narrative, dialogue, and musical score to create one of the most complex of the arts.

Photography, film, and video have come to play an important role in contemporary art as means to document live, temporary, or remote works. As much as Richard Serra would prefer for us to have experienced *Tilted Arc* in person, we know it today primarily through its photodocumentation. The artist Christo and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, purposefully create large-scale works that are in place for, at most, a few weeks. On June 24, 1995, for instance, the Christos completed wrapping the Reichstag in Berlin (Figure 22). Originally completed in 1894 to house the German parliament, the building has great significance to the German people. Soon after Hitler had become chancellor in 1933, it had been burned, an act symbolic of Hitler's desire to end parliamentary rule. Destroyed again in 1945 during the Battle of Berlin, it was rebuilt during the Cold War as a symbol of West Germany's dedication to democracy, but it was unclear what function it should actually serve. With the reunification of Germany

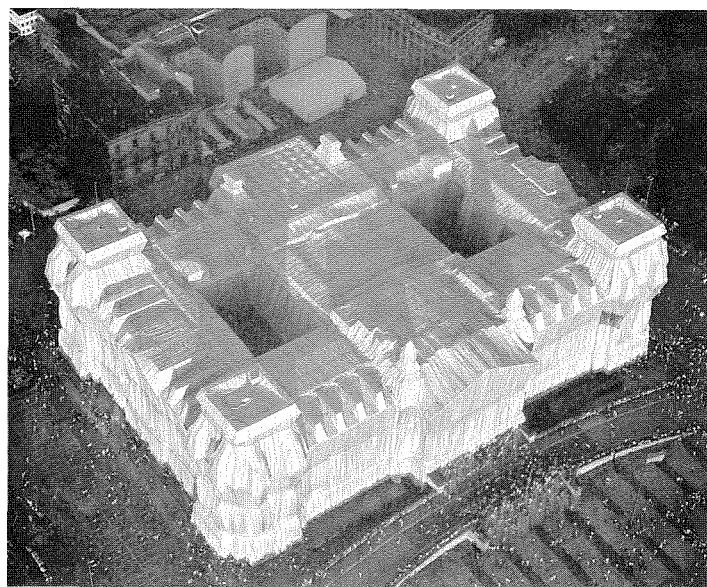


Figure 22 Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*, Berlin, 1971–95. © Christo 1995. Photo by Wolfgang Volz.

in 1990, the lower house of the German parliament, the Bundestag, moved in, an act symbolic of renewed German unity. The Christos had wanted to wrap the Reichstag since 1971, but were continually denied. Finally, in 1994, the Bundestag voted 292 to 223, with 9 abstentions, to let the Christos proceed. The wrapping required 1,076,000 square feet of woven polypropylene fabric with an aluminum surface and 51,181 feet of blue rope. Thousands of people, both in person and on the Internet, watched as 90 climbers and 110 workers created a wall of folds and draperies reminiscent of Greek sculpture (see Figure 18). When the building was unwrapped two weeks later, on July 7, it became clear that the Christos had succeeded in giving the people of Germany a “gift,” a celebratory renewal of the Reichstag.

The Christos’ works are always short-lived, “living on” only in the memory of those who saw them and in the array of drawings, models, photographs, and films that survive the actual work. As a result, many of their works—*Running Fence*, an 18-foot-high, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile-long, white fabric fence that ran through two northern California counties in 1976; *Surrounded Islands*, in which eleven islands in Biscayne Bay, Florida, were wrapped with pink fabric in 1983; and the 1991 *Umbrellas, Japan—U. S. A.*, in which 1,760 almost 20-foot-tall yellow umbrellas were opened

in the Tejon Pass in southern California at the same time that 1,340 blue umbrellas were opened in Ibaraki prefecture, north of Tokyo, Japan—have achieved an almost mythological status. The creation of this mythology is a fundamental part of the Christos’ work. Their monumental endeavors acquire something of the aura of the ruined monuments of ancient civilizations.

Finally, of all the new media, the computer and digital technologies associated with it have offered the artist a unique new set of possibilities, opening the image to the possibility of manipulation by both artist and audience. Photography, once thought of as a medium of evidentiary “truth,” a record of the visual world, has become, in the digital age, a medium in which new visual worlds can be created. Take, for instance, the work of German photographer Andreas Gursky. Many of his large photographs are completely unmanipulated, “straight” renderings of the contemporary world, but many others, such as the enormous *Untitled V* (Figure 23), may well capture the “truth” of contemporary experience but are themselves complete fabrications. To create *Untitled V*, Gursky built a short double shelf, which he then photographed six times, restocking it with new shoes in each instance—there are 204 sets of Nike running shoes in the work—and then repositioning his camera to create the proper angle. Finally, he pieced each of the six shots together to make the final image, a sort of testimony to commodity culture, NikeTown gone monumental. If this panorama of commerce is technically “inauthentic,” it seems, nevertheless, an “authentic” icon of contemporary life.

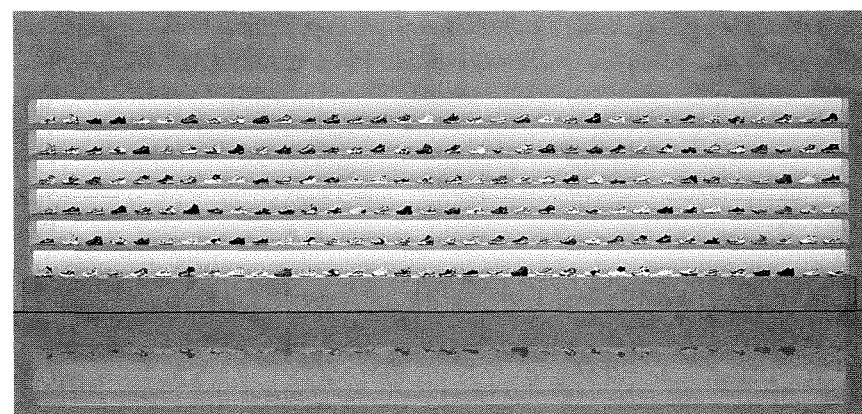


Figure 23 Andreas Gursky, *Untitled V*, 1997. C-Print, 73 in. $\times$ 174 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Mathew Marks Gallery, New York. © 2005 Andreas Gursky/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

RECOGNIZING THE PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

One thing that would suggest that the traditional distinction between spatial and temporal media might not be altogether valid is the sense of visual rhythm and repetition we often experience before works of art. Certain formal elements—lines, shapes, colors—recur, in either exact or analogous terms, and this repetition creates a sense of visual rhythm that is analogous to musical or poetic rhythm. In all the arts, rhythm and repetition serve to organize, or order, the work into distinct and recognizable patterns.

Rhythm and Repetition

Paul Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 24) is composed of a number of repeated shapes and lines that serve to unify the composition. Notice that the slope of the mountain itself is repeated down the right edge of the top of the central tree, again with uncanny accuracy in the branch that extends from the right side of the tree halfway down its trunk, and

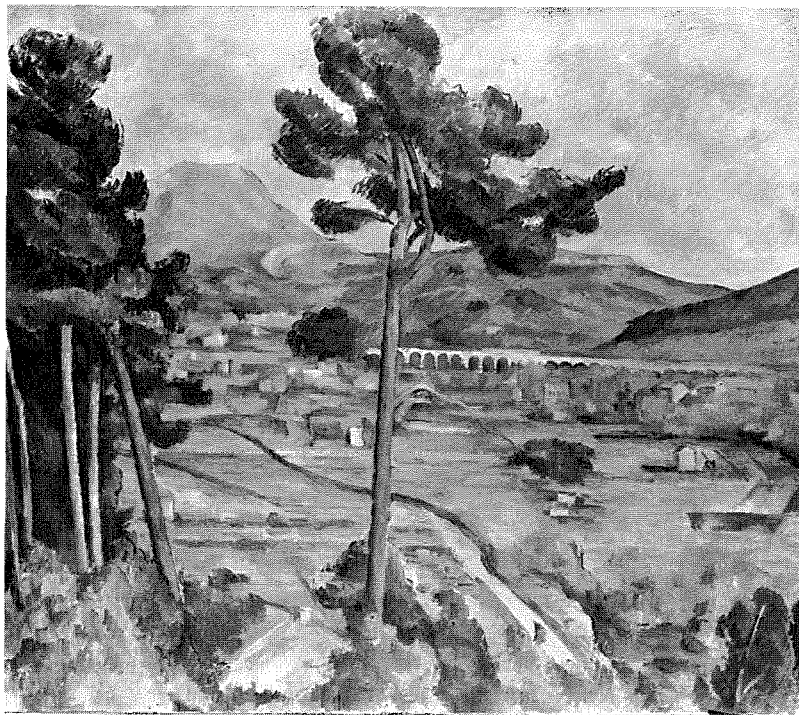


Figure 24 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1885–87. Oil on canvas, 25¼ in. × 32¾ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929. The H. O. Havemeyer Collection (29.100.64).

again, immediately below that, in the large curve of the river. The shape of the river on the left of the tree seems to echo, in reverse, the hill that comes into the composition from the right. A rhythm of arches extends the length of the railroad viaduct, and throughout the painting, small, square, and rectangular areas—buildings, roofs, chimneys, fields—echo and repeat each other's shapes. In a later version of this same motif (Figure 25), the precise elements of the landscape have virtually disappeared, yet here the small quadrilateral shapes—which now seem to have been created by single brushstrokes, moving in a sort of pulse through the composition—ascend toward the top of the mountain in a rhythm and movement of growing clarity and definition finally achieved by Cézanne at the painting's (and the mountain's) summit.

Balance

If you compare Cézanne's 1885–1887 version of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 24) to Perugino's *Crucifixion* (Figure 11), you will notice that one thing these very different paintings have in common is that they can be



Figure 25 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1904–06. Oil on canvas, 27½ in. × 36½ in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, George W. Elkins Collection. E1936-1-1.

divided into more or less equal quarters across the axes formed, in the Cézanne, by the central vertical tree and the arched railroad viaduct and, in the Perugino, along the vertical axis of the cross and the horizon line. This geometric division, which echoes and reinforces the shape of the frame in each painting, creates a sense of symmetry and equilibrium in both compositions. The sense of disequilibrium apparent in Crivelli's *Crucifixion* (Figure 12) derives in large part from the fact that, despite its overall symmetry and balance on a vertical axis, created by both the cross and the over-riding arch, there is no clear horizontal symmetry, and the structure of the right side of the composition seems radically different from the structure of the left. It is as if Crivelli has purposefully defied our expectation of balance.

There are many other ways to achieve a sense of balance in a composition. *Radial balance* is created when all the elements of the composition seem to emerge from a real or actual focal point. Many works of art utilize an *asymmetrical balance* in which a perceived center of gravity seems to balance elements around it. It is like balancing a teeter-totter with a very heavy child on one side and a light child on the other: the heavy child moves toward the center of the teeter-totter, while the lighter child sits on the very end. Furthermore, relatively dark shapes seem "heavier" to the eye than lighter ones.

Sometimes artists purposefully choose to violate the principle of balance. Franz Kline's *Mahoning* (Figure 14) is a case in point. He once commented on the way that black and white exert tension upon one another in his paintings: "I thought about it in a certain sense of the awkwardness of 'not-balance,' the tentative reality of lack of balance."¹² His contemporary, the abstract painter Milton Resnick, described the feeling in similar terms. In his painting, he said, "I'm falling. I keep from falling. I'm falling. I keep from falling."¹³ For both, the lack of balance helped to create a sense of action and energy in the painting.

Proportion

Proportion is the relationship of each part of the composition to the whole and to each other part. An excellent example of its use can be seen in the 1904–1906 version of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 25). You will notice that the composition is divided neatly at the foot of the mountain. This line, with the mountain and clouds above it and the countryside of Aix-en-Provence in southern France below it, very closely corresponds to what the ancient Greeks referred to as "the golden section." This proportion—which is found, incidentally, in living organisms—can be defined mathematically as follows: The smaller section (in the Cézanne, the area above the line running across the bottom of the mountain) is to the larger

section (the countryside below) as the larger section is to the whole painting. In numbers, each ratio is 1 to 1.618. Not only did the Greeks use this "ideal" or "perfect" proportion as the basis for constructing their greatest buildings, but they conceived of the human body in the same terms. The perfect body, they reasoned, consists of a torso and head roughly equivalent to the vertical height of the top of the Cézanne composition, the body from the waist down equivalent to the lower part of the composition. Such proportional ideals, it is worth suggesting, dominate our visual thinking to this day—from our sense of when a landscape painting "feels" right to our sense of the ideal human form.

Scale

Scale is an issue with which we have dealt already in relation to the "museum without walls." It is sometimes very difficult, for instance, to get an accurate feeling for a work of art's size from a photograph of it. To get a sense of this principle, you need only think again of the actual size of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (Figure 10) and the viewer's inability to take it all in at once, compared with the sense of containment one feels before it in reproduction. Similarly, only from a series of photographs or from the film can you get a sense of the many elements of Noguchi's *Sculpture Garden* (Figure 19). Part of the extraordinarily comic effect of Roy Lichtenstein's monumental sculpture *Brushstroke* (Figure 35) derives from the fact that it is so large, not only in relation to a normal brushstroke but in relation to the Hirshhorn Museum, which rises behind it.

Other, more subtle effects can be achieved by manipulating scale. In Cézanne's 1885–1887 *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 24), for instance, there appears to be a large bush or tree at the end of the railroad viaduct just to the left of the central tree. If it were really a tree, however, it would be 300 or 400 feet tall. It is, in fact, part of the pine in the foreground. In a very subtle move here, Cézanne purposefully draws the most distant planes of the canvas up to the closest by confusing our reading of what is near and what is far away. As a result, our attention is drawn to the surface of the composition, to its organization as a design, as much as to its representation of a three-dimensional world.

Scale is relative. That is, we define the scale of an object in terms of its relation to other objects around it. Thus, the two video images in Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* (Figure 21) are very different in scale—one large, one small—and this difference in scale contributes to the work's disorienting sense of space. In another example, the artist Nikolai Buglaj has transformed a classical example of an optical illusion created by a shift in the context in which objects are perceived into a

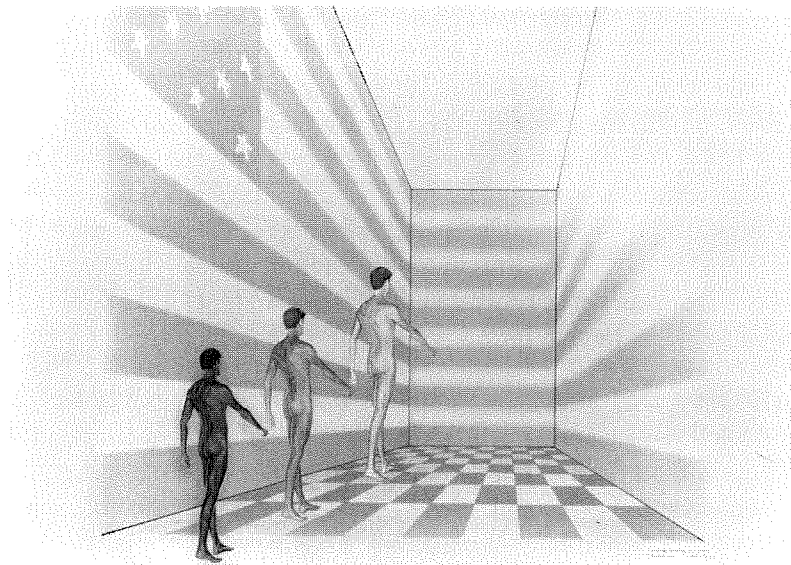


Figure 26 Nikolai Buglaj, *Racial Optical Illusion*, 1997. Pencil and ink on paper, 30 × 40 in. Courtesy the artist.

commentary on race relations in the United States (Figure 26). The three figures in this piece are all the same size (if you don't believe it, measure them for yourself), but because the figure outside the room is, in effect, contextless, he looks small. The figure entering the room appears to be larger, and the figure inside the room appears largest of all. The surrounding walls alter the relative scale in which each figure is perceived. The wall of the room is decorated with an American flag, and it represents, for Buglaj, the "system" from which African Americans are excluded, thus making them appear smaller than they are. Conversely, from the outside looking in, the white man appears larger than he really is.

Unity and Variety

One of the primary sources of interest and power in many works of art is the way their various elements are combined to create a sense of oneness or unity. Picasso's *Woman with Book*, for instance, on the back cover, is almost wildly diverse in its color, but its pattern of repetitive shapes unifies it. Round forms—from necklace, to armchair, to Marie-Thérèse's breasts—draw the various colors together, as do the teardrop shapes that make up both sleeves of Marie-Thérèse's dress as well as the bodice of her dress. In fact, the pattern of interlaced curves that circulate around and across the model's body unifies the entire composition.

CONSIDERING QUESTIONS OF MEDIUM

Each of the different media—painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture, architecture, photography, video, film, fiber, ceramics, metal, and glass, among others—has its distinctive qualities, and within each there are various subcategories—in painting, for instance, there is oil, acrylic, watercolor, tempera, gouache, and so on—that can elicit far different effects in themselves. One of the most important differences between the Perugino and Crivelli *Crucifixions* (Figures 11 and 12), which we have so far not discussed, lies in the artists' choice of medium. The first is an oil painting, while the second is painted in tempera. As we have already noted, oil paint is translucent—light penetrates it and is reflected back—and thus Perugino's medium contributes to the painting's sense of hopefulness, its seeming promise of salvation. Tempera, on the other hand, is opaque, and, unless varnished, its flat, matte finish seems dull compared to the glowing surface of an oil painting, qualities perfectly in keeping with the prevailing sense of misery in Crivelli's work.

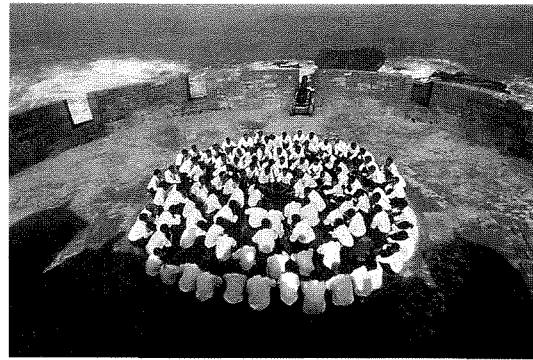
Sometimes a given medium is particularly suitable for conveying a given set of ideas. Black-and-white film, for instance, lends itself particularly effectively to the portrayal of tension and opposition. Shirin Neshat, an Iranian artist who came to the United States in 1979 to study art, was struck, eleven years later, when she finally returned to her homeland, by the profound change that had occurred. Color had disappeared and everything was black and white—the men dressed in white shirts, the women in traditional black *chadors*, head-to-toe coverings that reveal only face and hands. The *chador*, especially from the Western perspective that Neshat brought with her upon her return to Iran, represents the oppression of women in Islamic society, but within the context of Islam, many women believe that they are truly equal to men, and they claim that the *chador*, by concealing a woman's sexuality, prevents her from becoming a sexual object. This tension is the subject of Neshat's 1999 video installation *Rapture* (Figures 27a and b). Composed of two videos projected simultaneously on opposite walls, on one side of the room a group of men are seen in a fortified castle, where they engage in ritual activities. On the other side, women approach the castle, observe the men, then turn their back on the males' activities, walk to the sea, where six of them climb into a boat setting themselves adrift. On the opposite wall, the men, who have gathered on the ramparts, wave goodbye, as if the gulf that separates men from women in Islamic culture is, at least partially, unbridgeable.

Video, in other words, brings the tensions implicit in the still image to life. As a medium, it animates the photograph. Something of the same



Figure 27a and b Shirin Neshat, *Rapture*, 1997. Two video production stills. © Shirin Neshat 1999. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

effect is achieved in the relation between, say, the drawings of a Michelangelo for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome and the finished fresco, or between Christo's preparatory collage drawings for his projects such as *The Gates* (Figures 28 and 29)



and the fully realized piece, which was installed in New York's Central Park in the winter of 2005. Although the collages represent one of the principal ways that Christo and Jeanne-Claude raise the funds necessary to create their work—they accept neither private nor foundation support—they also document the evolution of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's ideas. They are, additionally, as Christo has said, “works of art on their own,” even if the experience of the actual installation is a vastly different experience. To see a piece like the *Wrapped Reichstag* (Figure 22) or *The Gates* in person is, in Christo's words, “a little bit like if you are a sportsman, if you climb the Himalaya. In a way it is the unrepeatable experience. It cannot be substituted with anything, not the film, or the photographs, nor books, nor records can substitute that art experience.”¹⁴

BEGINNING YOUR ESSAY BY DESCRIBING THE WORK

One of the best ways to begin an essay on a work of art is to describe it as accurately as possible. Description serves two purposes. On the one hand, it orients your readers by drawing their attention to what you believe are the most salient features of the work. But perhaps more important,

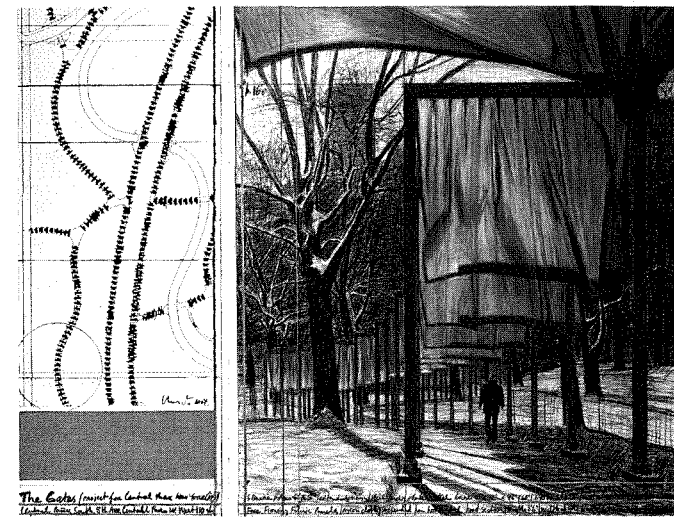


Figure 28 (above) Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*, Project for Central Park, New York City, 2004. Collage: Pencil, fabric, charcoal, pastel, wax crayon, enamel paint, map and fabric sample; in two parts: 30½ in. × 12 in. and 30½ in. × 26¼ in. Photo by Wolfgang Volz, © Christo 2004.



Figure 29 (right) Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*, Project for Central Park, New York City, 1979–2005. Photo by Wolfgang Volz, © Christo 2005.

description forces you to scrutinize the work yourself. In the process of describing the work well, considering not just its subject matter and medium but its formal elements and principles of composition, you will almost always gain a better understanding of the artist's intentions and more fully grasp the meaning of the work.

The following description of a photograph by Walker Evans (Figure 30) was written by a student, Richard Watson, as part of a final exam essay in a course on the history of photography. Before reading on,

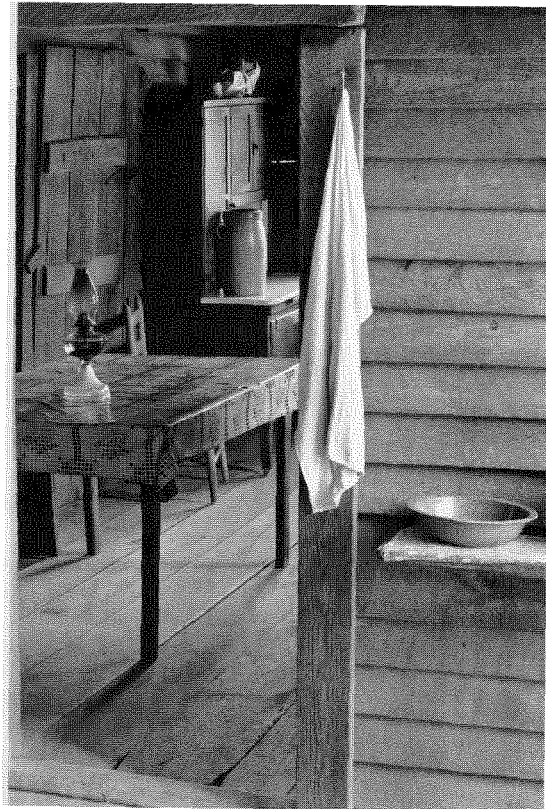


Figure 30 Walker Evans, *Washroom and Dining Area of Floyd Burroughs's Home, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936. 35mm photograph. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

you might find it useful to jot down a few of your own notes describing the photograph so that you can compare your own descriptive abilities to Richard's. Remember, I think Richard's description is exemplary, and if your description does not quite measure up to his, that is probably as it should be. Richard's descriptive abilities were nowhere nearly this developed when he first began writing about art, some three years and seven art history classes before he wrote the essay from which this description is excerpted.

Evans's creation is a symphony of shapes, textures, lines, and planes. The round washbasin sitting on the rectangular shelf, in front of alternating thick and thin horizontal wallboards, the vertical doorframe, the square kitchen table with

its multifaceted curved and shaped kerosene lamp, the beefy square kitchen hutch with its rectangular upper cupboard, and the elegant pitcher with its graceful curves, all contribute to the geometric harmony of this quiet setting. The textures of the rough wooden doorframe, the back door set against the smooth floorboard, the soft tablecloth, and the polished glass lamp and pitcher offer an array of tactile sensation. Most notable is the towel hanging in the center of the photograph, which together with the heavy vertical doorframe cuts the composition in half and provides the focal point of the composition.

By combining simple geometric shapes, Evans has created a powerfully dramatic composition. The elements of light and darkness (enhanced by his choice of medium, black-and-white photography) generate a tension of opposition and harmony among the shapes and produce a unique sense of balance: the white towel against the dark doorframe, the black table leg and its shadow cutting across the brightly sunlit floor, and the sun-drenched pitcher framed by the black back wall, all generate a play of light and dark. The effect is enhanced by the thick bands of grayish wood in the front wall, chopped into equal parts by the thin black lines of shadow that separate them. The vertical frame of the door, the table legs, and the upper part of the kitchen hutch rise in juxtaposition to the horizontal plane of the front wall, the door's header, creating a series of short, rigidly uniform lines. The diagonal run of the wide floorboards, broken by thin, dark joints is echoed by the broad kitchen table, the lined tablecloth, and the sun-bathed work space of the kitchen hutch.

This description formed the basis of Richard's essay. Although he went on to place the photograph in a larger context—it was one of many Evans created for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression and it was reproduced without commentary in the opening pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a work he published with writer James Agee in 1941—Richard argued that the formal eloquence of the photograph mirrored Evans's and Agee's overall purpose. Both writer and photographer wanted to reveal the inherent dignity of Alabama's impoverished sharecroppers. The order and harmony of the scene elevate the banal and humble to the level of art.

ASKING YOURSELF ABOUT THE WORK OF ART: A SUMMARY

The following set of questions derives from the previous discussion and is meant as a quick reminder of the kinds of things you might ask yourself about a work of art. It is by no means complete, and you almost surely will discover that most works of art raise still other questions. Nor will every question be of particular importance in your coming to terms with each work you see. Still, this summary list does provide you with a model of the kind of analytical process that will help you understand what you see. (These questions are reproduced inside the front cover so that you can readily access them.)

One last word of warning: Don't take these questions as an outline of your eventual paper. Good essays are never written by answering a series of predetermined questions. Consider them, rather, as a guide designed to help you take the notes and organize the thoughts that will eventually lead to writing a good essay.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE WRITING ABOUT A WORK OF ART

What is the subject matter of the work?

- What is its title?
- Does the title help you interpret what you see?
- Can you imagine different treatments of the same subject matter that would change the way you read the work?

What formal elements are important to the work and how do they relate to its subject matter?

- How is line employed in the work?
- Does it seem to regulate or order the composition?
- Does it seem to fragment the work?
- Is it consistent with traditional laws of perspective or does it violate them?
- What is the relation of shape to space in the work?
- How do light and dark function in the work? Is there a great deal of tonal contrast, or is it held to a minimum?
- What is the predominant color scheme of the work? Are complementary or analogous colors employed?
- What other elements seem important? Is your attention drawn to the work's texture? Does time seem an important factor in your experience of the work?

How are these elements organized?

- Is there significant use of visual rhythm and repetition of elements?
- Is the composition balanced? Symmetrically? Asymmetrically?
- Do the work's various elements seem proportional, and how does the question of scale affect your perception?
- Does the composition seem unified or not?

How has the artist's choice of medium played a role in the presentation of the various elements and their organization or design?

- Are effects achieved that are realizable only in this particular medium?
- If more than one medium is involved, what is their relation?

What does all this *mean*?

- What are the artist's intentions? How do these intentions manifest themselves in the composition? Are there other feelings or attitudes that the composition seems to evoke, and what specific elements or design choices account for those feelings?