

Analysing Artworks: A Step-by-Step Guide

⇒ Follow these steps, answer all the questions and you can't go wrong!

⇒ Remember that your own drawings/copies of the artwork should accompany ALL written analysis.

1: First Reaction

Write down your first response to the artwork.

- Do you like it?
- How does it make you feel?
- Does it remind you of anything you have seen before?

2: Description

List what you can see in this artwork.

- Figures, colours, shapes, objects, background etc.
- Imagine you are describing it to a blind person. Do this in as much detail as possible.

3: Formal Analysis

Write down your observations in more detail, looking at these specific aspects of the artwork:

Colours:

- which type of *palette* has the artist used: is it bright or dull, strong or weak?
- are the colours mostly complementary, primary, secondary or tertiary?
- Which colour(s) are used most in this artwork?
- Which colour(s) are used least in this artwork?
- Are the colours used different ways in different parts of the artwork?
- Have the colours been applied flat, 'straight from the tube', or have different colours been mixed?

Tones:

- is there a use of light / shadow in this artwork?
- where is the light coming from? where are the shadows?
- Are the forms in the artwork realistically modelled (does it look 3D)?
- is there a wide range of tonal contrast (very light highlights and very dark shadows) or is the tonal range quite narrow (ie mostly similar tones)?

Use of media:

- what medium has been used (oil paint, acrylic, charcoal, clay etc)?
- How has the artist used the medium – ie is the paint applied thick or thin? How can you tell?
- Can you see brushstrokes, markmaking or texture? Describe the shape and direction of the brushstrokes / marks. What size of brush / pencil was used?
- Was it painted, drawn, sculpted quickly, or slowly and painstakingly? What makes you think this?

Composition (organisation of shapes):

- what type of shapes are used in this artwork (ie rounded, curved, straight-edged or geometric shapes)?
- Is there a mixture of different types of shapes or are all the shapes similar?

- Are some parts of the composition full of shapes and some parts empty, or are the shapes spread evenly across the artwork?
- Are some shapes repeated or echoed in other parts of the artwork?
- Does the whole composition look full of energy and movement, or does it look still and peaceful? How did the artist create this movement/stillness?
- What is the centre of interest in the composition?
- How does the artist draw your attention to it?

Mood / Emotion:

- What do you think the artist wanted you to feel when you look at this artwork?
- What has he/she used to create a mood? (think about colour, shape, tone etc.)
- How has he/she succeeded in creating this mood? (For example, strong vivid colours might be used to create a joyful *or* angry mood in an artwork, depending upon how the artist has used them).
- Could the same mood have been created in a different way? How could you change this?

4: Interpretation

Now write down your *personal* thoughts about the work: there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here!

- What do you think the artist is trying to say in this artwork? what does it mean?
- What is the main theme or idea behind this piece?
- If you were inside this artwork, what would you be feeling / thinking?
- does the artwork have a narrative (tell a story)? is it a religious artwork?
- is it abstract? is it realistic? Why?
- How would you explain this artwork to someone else?

5: Evaluation

Based upon what you have observed already, give your opinion of the artwork. You **MUST** give reasons. *Eg:*

- "Franz Marc has created an effective expressive painting, because the hot colours and lively brushmarks he has used add to the overall feeling of energy and excitement he is trying to create."
- "The overall mood of this drawing would be improved if Kathe Kollowitz had used strong, dramatic shadows, instead of just pale tones. Dark tones would develop the feeling of fear and loneliness in this image."
- "Picasso has used sharp, stabbing, geometric shapes in some areas of his composition to create a sense of violence and distress within 'Guernica'. These make the figures and animals seem more vulnerable, as if in pain and suffering while under attack."

Writing about Painting – A glossary of useful terms:

- **Alla Prima** the paint is applied in one layer only; there are no under-layers or over-working. The work of the Fauves was often alla-prima; their energetic, spontaneous style suited this method of working.
- **Gestural** A loose, energetic application of paint which relies on the artist's movements to make expressive marks on the canvas. This is supposed to be a very personal and unique way of working - almost like handwriting. Look at artists like Cy Twombly or Antoni Tapies for examples.
- **Glaze (or Wash)** a semi-transparent layer of thinned paint. Many traditional painters like Michaelangelo made use of this technique to create the subtle tones of skin or fabric. For a more modern use of the glazing technique, look at the abstract, gestural paintings of Helen Frankenthaler.
- **Impasto** a thick layer of paint, often applied in several layers with a brush or palette knife. Look at the dense, textural brushwork of paintings by artists like Gillian Ayres or Frank Auerbach.
- **Plein-aire** a painting which has been made outside, often quite quickly, to cope with changing weather, light effects etc. The Impressionists were the first artists to paint outdoors, rather than in their studios. Before this, however, many artists had sketched outdoors in preparation for painting; the oil sketches of Constable are an excellent example.
- **Pointillist** the use of many tiny dots of pure colour which seem to 'blend' when seen at a distance. Georges Seurat's work is the most famous example of this almost-scientific technique. Look also at the paintings of his pupil, Paul Signac.
- **Scumbling** a thin glaze of paint dragged over a different colour, so that both layers of paint can be seen, giving a luminous, glowing effect. Abstract painters like Mark Rothko made use of this technique.
- **Sfumato** literally means 'smoked' in Italian; the use of heavy, dark tones to suggest mystery and atmosphere. Rembrandt's late self portraits are a superb example of this technique in practice.
- **Sketch** A quick painting, often made in preparation for the 'final version'. See also 'plein-aire'.

'Brushwork'

The way in which the artist uses the brush to apply paint. Brushwork can be *loose, energetic, controlled, tight, obsessive, repetitive, random* etc.

'Palette'

1. A wooden or plastic tray, used for mixing colours when making a painting.
2. The choice of colours in a painting ie 'van Gogh uses a pure and vivid *palette* in his Arles landscapes'.

'Tone' or 'tonal'

1. The elements of light and shadow in an artwork ie 'Kathe Kollowitz's etchings use strong, dense *tones* to create an intense, sorrowful mood.
2. The range of tones within an artwork ie 'Rembrandt's later portraits use a very dark *tonal range*'.

'Support'

The surface that a painting or drawing is produced on. Supports can be paper, card, wood, canvas, metal etc. ie 'Antoni Tapies's paintings sometimes look as if they have been attacked. The *support* is often violently torn, ripped and stabbed into.'

Writing about Colour – A glossary of useful terms:

- **Primary colours:** red, yellow and blue. Primary colours can be used to mix a wide range of colours. There are *cool* and *warm* primary colours. (ie warm cadmium red and cool vermilion red OR warm primary yellow and cool lemon yellow).
- **Secondary colours:** orange, green and purple. Secondary colours are mixed by combining two primary colours.
- **Complementary colours:** pairs of opposite colours on the colour wheel: green-red, blue-orange and yellow-purple. Complementary colours are as contrasting as possible (ie there is no yellow at all in the colour purple). Painters like Andre Derain and van Gogh often made use of the contrasts of complementary colours in their paintings.
- **Tertiary colours:** A wide range of natural or neutral colours. Tertiary colours are created by mixing two complementary colours together. Tertiary colours are the colours of nature: skin, plants, wood, stone etc.
- **Tones:** are created by adding black to any colour. (ie maroon is a tone of red).
- **Tints:** are created by adding white to any colour. (ie pink is a tint of red).
- **Palette:** the *choice* of colours an artist makes; ie 'Van Gogh uses a vivid *palette* to paint his Arles landscapes'.
- **Limited palette:** the selection of only a few colours within an artwork; ie 'In this drawing, Matisse has used a limited palette of ultramarine blues and purples to create a moody, subdued atmosphere.'
- **Broad palette:** the use of a wide range of different colours within an artwork; ie 'Kandinsky's paintings are instantly recognisable for their use of geometric shapes, but also for the broad palette of colours he employs.'
- **Tonal range:** the range of *tones* in an artwork from light to dark. A wide tonal range would include all tones from white to black. A narrow tonal range would include only pale tones, only mid tones or only dark tones; ie 'Kathe Kollowitz's etchings make powerful use of a narrow tonal range to create oppressive, dark images.'
- **Opacity:** the density or thickness of the colour used; if the colour is strong and nothing can be seen beneath it, the colour is said to be opaque. Acrylic and oil colours are often opaque.
- **Transparency:** thin, transparent colour, with perhaps other colours, shapes and lines visible beneath it. Watercolour paintings typically use transparent colour.

- **Useful adjectives you might use when describing COLOUR:**

Saturated, bright, pure, vivid, strong, harsh, dramatic, vibrant, brilliant, intense, powerful.

Muted, subtle, gentle, dull, soft, watery, subdued, delicate, gloomy, tertiary, faded, limited.

Writing About Cultural Values Attached To The Arts

Useful terms to consider:

When the arts of the past are seen in museums, they are effectively detached from the life of the culture within which they originated. If you only see these art objects in books or photographs, it is very difficult to see them as a 'real' part of a living culture. To begin to understand the meanings various arts had for the societies they came from, consider the following values:

RELIGIOUS VALUES: Arts were often essential to the belief systems of many cultures; for example: statues of gods/deities, temples, icons, altarpieces, masks, music, dances etc.

SOCIAL VALUES: Arts often symbolised group identity and pride; for example: banners, headdresses, tattooing, flags, chants, anthems etc.

PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL: Arts sometimes provided assurance of the continuity of life; for example: portraits, epic poetry, mythological tales, hymns etc.

USEFUL or PRACTICAL VALUES: Art was often an integral aspect of functional objects, both in shape and decoration; for example: knives, pottery, lamps, buildings etc.

SENSUAL VALUES: Arts provided a direct source of sensual pleasure and perhaps an intrinsically aesthetic response; for example: textiles, clothing, sculpture, music etc.

EDUCATIONAL VALUES: Arts were frequently a means of transmitting the values, attitudes and history of a culture; for example: cave painting, frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, epic poetry, historic drama, tribal dance etc.

DECORATIVE VALUES: Arts were used to enhance people's appearance or to beautify the environment; for example: jewellery, wall-hangings, tapestries, clothing etc.

COMMUNICATION VALUES: Arts reached the illiterate for whom the written word was meaningless; for example: friezes, stained glass windows, mosaics etc.

AN EXAMPLE:

Medieval cathedrals integrated most of the values above.

The cathedrals were the focus of the religious life of the community even as they were being built by hundreds of ordinary people and skilled craftsmen over long periods of time. The towers symbolically rose high above the town and, within the walls, the sculpture and stained glass windows stirred the emotions of the faithful. Processions with banners, chants and the Mass, with its music, poetry and drama, integrated the arts and values of the culture. All of this gave meaning and continuity to the otherwise impoverished lives of the common people.