



Edouard Manet, *Woman Writing*, brush and black ink 5 $\frac{5}{16}$ " \times 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
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A Short Guide to Writing about Art

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Preface

Another book for the student of art to read? I can only echo William James's report of the unwed mother's defense: "It's such a little baby." The title and the table of contents adequately reveal the subject of this book; if the chapters themselves fail to please and instruct, and if the ten questions listed on the inside front cover do not help to produce better essays, no preface will avail.

Still, a few additional words may be useful. Everyone knows that students today do not write as well as they used to. Probably they never did, but it is a truth universally acknowledged (among English teachers) that the cure is *not* harder work from instructors in composition courses; rather, the only cure is a demand, on the part of the entire faculty, that students in all classes write decently. But instructors outside of departments of English understandably say that they lack the time — and perhaps the skill — to teach writing in addition to, say, art. This book may offer a remedy. Students who read it — and it is short enough to be read in addition to whatever readings the instructor regularly requires — should be able to improve their essays, partly by studying the principles explained (e.g., on tone, paragraphing, and manuscript form) and partly by studying the short models throughout the book. It contains three essays by students, two by professors, and numerous paragraphs from published scholars such as Rudolf Arnheim, Albert Elsen, Anne Hollander, Meyer Schapiro, and Leo Steinberg. These discussions should help students to understand the sorts of things one says, and the ways one says them, when writing about art. After all, people *do* write about art, not only in the classroom but in learned journals, catalogs, and even in newspapers and magazines.

hand side of the painting, which is accentuated by the lack of expression in the faces of the other figures.” Golding does this in order to support his assertion that “the first impression made by the *Demoiselles* . . . is one of violence and unrest.” The point, then, is not to repress or to disguise one’s personal response but to suggest that this response is not eccentric and private. Golding can safely assume that his response is tied to the object, and he can also safely assume that we share his initial response because he cites evidence that pretty much compels us to feel as he does. Here, as in most good criticism, we get what has been called “persuasive description.”

Understandably, instructors would rather hear the evidence than hear assertions about the writer’s feelings, but to say that a writer does not keep repeating “I feel” is not to say that “I” cannot be used. Nothing is wrong with occasionally using “I,” and noticeable avoidances of it — “It is seen that,” “this writer,” “we,” and the like — suggest an offensive sham modesty; still, too much talk of “I” makes a writer sound like an egomaniac.

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Analysis

ANALYTICAL THINKING: SEEING AND SAYING

An analysis is, literally, a separating into parts in order to understand the whole. You might, for example, analyze Michelangelo’s marble statue *David* (p. 16) by considering

its sources (in the Bible, in Hellenistic sculpture, in Donatello’s bronze *David*, and in the ideas of the age — e.g., David as a civic hero and David as the embodiment of Fortitude)

its material (marble lends itself to certain postures but not to others, and marble has an effect — in texture and color — that granite or bronze or wood does not have)

its pose (which gives it its outline, its masses, and its enclosed spaces or lack of them)

its facial expression

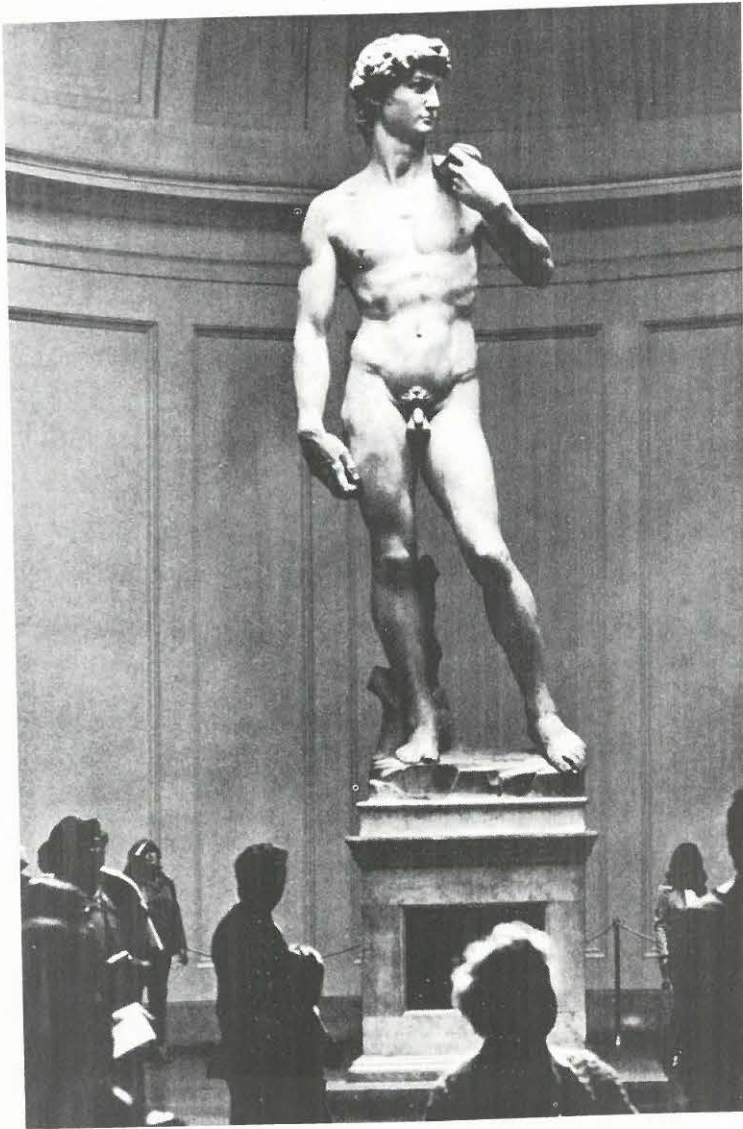
its nudity (a nude Adam is easily understandable, but why a nude David?)

its size (here, in this over-life-size figure, man as hero)

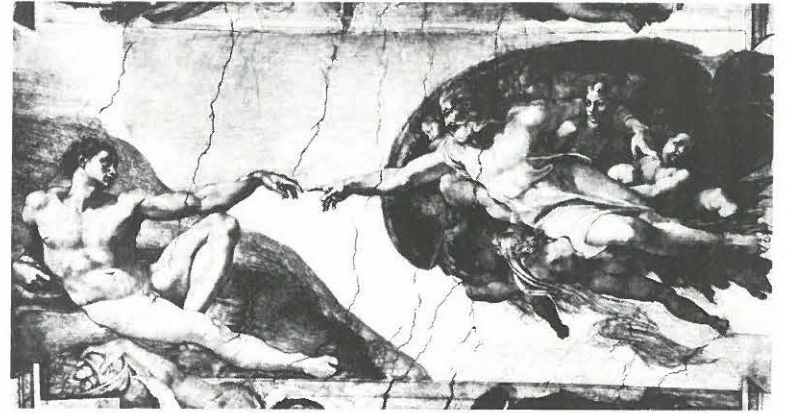
its original site

and anything else you think the sculpture consists of — or does not consist of, for Michelangelo, unlike his predecessor Donatello, does not include the head of the slain Goliath, and thus Michelangelo’s image is not explicitly that of a conquering hero. Or you might confine your attention to any one of these elements.

Analysis, of course, is not a process used only in talking about art. It is commonly applied in thinking about almost any complex matter. Martina Navratilova plays a deadly game of tennis. What



Michelangelo, *David*, 1501–4. Marble, 13'5". Accademia, Florence.
(Photograph courtesy of H. W. Janson)

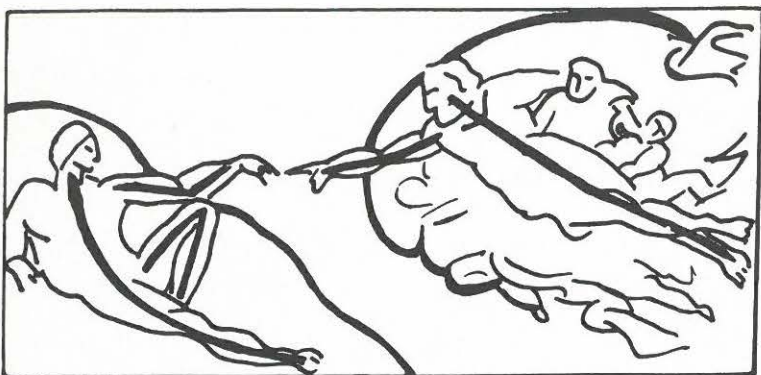


Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–12. Fresco, 9'2" × 18'8".
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. (The Vatican Museums)

makes it so good? How does her backhand contribute? What does her serve do to her opponents? The relevance of such questions is clear. Similarly, it makes sense, if you are writing about art, to try to see the components of the work.

Here is a very short analysis of one aspect of one of Michelangelo's paintings, *The Creation of Adam* (1508–12), on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The writer's *thesis*, or point that underlies his analysis, is, first, that the lines of a pattern say something, communicate something to the viewer, and, second, that the viewer does not merely *see* the pattern but experiences it, participates in it.

The "story" of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, is understood by every reader of the book of Genesis. But even the story is modified in a way that makes it more comprehensible and impressive to the eye. The Creator, instead of breathing a living soul into the body of clay — a motif not easily translatable into an expressive pattern — reaches out toward the arm of Adam as though an animating spark, leaping from fingertip to fingertip, were transmitted from the maker to the creature. The bridge of the arm visually connects two separate worlds: the self-contained compactness of the mantle that encloses God and is given forward motion by the diagonal of his body; and the incom-



plete, flat slice of the earth, whose passivity is expressed in the backward slant of its contour. There is passivity also in the concave curve over which the body of Adam is molded. It is lying on the ground and enabled partly to rise by the attractive power of the approaching creator. The desire and potential capacity to get up and walk are indicated as a subordinate theme in the left leg, which also serves as a support of Adam's arm, unable to maintain itself freely like the energy-charged arm of God.

Our analysis shows that the ultimate theme of the image, the idea of creation, is conveyed by what strikes the eye first and continues to organize the composition as we examine its details. The structural skeleton reveals the dynamic theme of the story. And since the pattern of transmitted, life-giving energy is not simply recorded by the sense of vision but presumably arouses in the mind a corresponding configuration of forces, the observer's reaction is more than a mere taking cognizance of an external object. The forces that characterize the meaning of the story come alive in the observer and produce the kind of stirring participation that distinguishes artistic experience from the detached acceptance of information.

Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*,
New Version (Berkeley and Los Angeles:
University of California Press, 1974), pp. 458–60

Notice that Arnheim does not discuss color, or the Renaissance background, or the place of the work in its site or in Michelangelo's development, though any or all of these are fit topics also. He has chosen to analyze the effect of only one element, but his

paragraphs *are* an analysis, an attempt to record perceptions and to reflect on them.

SUBJECT MATTER AND CONTENT

Before we go on to analyze some of the ways in which art communicates, we can take a moment to distinguish between the *subject matter* of a work and the *content* or *meaning*. (Later in this chapter, on pp. 52–57, we will see that the content or meaning is expressed through the *style* or *form*, but it is best to postpone discussion of those difficult terms for as long as possible.)

Something has already been said (p. 11) on iconology, the study of artistic images and the cultural thoughts and attitudes that they reflect. For example, two pictures of the same subject matter — the Crucifixion — can express different meanings: One picture can show Christ's painful death (head drooping to one side, eyes closed, brows and mouth contorted, arms pulled into a V by the weight of the body, body twisted into an S shape); the other can show Christ's conquest of death (eyes open, face composed, arms horizontal, body relatively straight and self-possessed). The subject matter in both is the same — the Crucifixion — but the meaning or content is utterly different.

Or, to turn to another genre, if we look at some nineteenth-century landscapes we may see (aided by Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825–1875*) that the subject matter of skies streaked with red and yellow embodies a *content* that can be described, at least roughly, as the grandeur of God. Perhaps Paul Klee was trying to turn our attention from subject matter to content when he said, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." The content, one might say, is the subject matter transformed or recreated or infused by intellect and feeling with meaning — in short, the content is a meaning made visible. This is what Henri Matisse was getting at when he said that drawing is "not an exercise of particular dexterity but above all a means of expressing intimate feelings and moods."

Even abstract or nonobjective art, one can argue, makes vis-

ible the artist's inner experiences and thus has a subject matter that conveys a meaning. Consider Picasso's words: "There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work." This seems entirely reasonable. A bit less reasonable, but still only an exaggeration rather than an utter falsehood, is Vassily Kandinsky's remark: "The impact of an acute triangle on a sphere generates as much emotional impact as the meeting of God and Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation*." In this exaggeration Kandinsky touches on the truth that a painting conveys more than the objects that it represents. Still, lest we go too far in searching for a content in or behind or under the subject matter, we should recall a story. In the 1920s the poet Paul Eluard was eloquently talking to Joan Miró about what Eluard took to be a solar symbol in one of Miró's paintings. After a decent interval Miró replied, "That's not a solar symbol. It is a potato."

Speaking metaphorically, we can say that the meaning or content of a work of art is conveyed in the *language* of the art. For example, a picture with short, choppy, angular lines will "say" something different from a picture with gentle curves, even though the subject matter (let's say a woman sitting at a table) is approximately the same. When Klee spoke of "going for a walk with a line," he had in mind a line's ability (so to speak) to move quickly or slowly, assertively or tentatively. Of course many of the words we use in talking about lines — or shapes or colors — are metaphorical. If, for instance, we say that a line is "agitated" or "nervous" or "tentative" or "bold" we are not implying that the line is literally alive and endowed with feelings. We are really talking about the way in which we perceive the line, or, more precisely, we are setting forth our inference about what the artist intended or in fact produced, but such talk is entirely legitimate.

Are the lines of a drawing thick or thin, broken or unbroken? A soft pencil drawing on pale gray paper will say something different from a pen drawing made with a relatively stiff reed nib on bright white paper; at the very least the medium and the subdued contrast of the one are quieter than those of the other. Similarly, a

painting with a rough surface built up with vigorous or agitated brush strokes will not say the same thing — will not have the same meaning — as a painting with a smooth, polished surface that gives no evidence of the brush. If nothing else, the painting that gives evidence of brush strokes announces the presence of the painter, whereas the polished surface seems to eliminate the painter from the painting. For obvious examples, compare a work by an Action painter of the late 1940s and the 1950s such as Jackson Pollock (the marks on the canvas almost let us see the painter in the *act* of brushing or dribbling or spattering the pigment) with a work by a Pop artist such as Andy Warhol or Robert Indiana. Pop artists tended to favor commonplace images (e.g., Campbell's soup cans) and impersonal media such as the serigraph. Their works call to mind not the individual artist but anonymous commercial art and the machine, and these commercial, mechanical associations are part of the meaning of the works. Such works express what Warhol said in 1968: "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine."

ASKING QUESTIONS TO GET ANSWERS

The painter Ad Reinhardt once said that "Looking is not as simple as it looks." What are some of the basic things to look for in trying to acquire an understanding of the languages of art, that is, in trying to understand what a work of art expresses? Matisse has a comment on how all of the parts of a work contribute to the whole: "Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part."

One can begin a discussion of this complex business of expression in the arts almost anywhere, but let's begin with some basic questions that can be asked of almost any work of art — whether a painting or a drawing or a sculpture or even a building.

What is my first response to the work? (Later you may modify or even reject this response, but begin by trying to study it.)

When and where was the work made? Does it reveal the qualities that your textbook attributes to the culture? (Don't assume that it does; works of art have a way of eluding easy generalizations.)

Where would the work originally have been seen? Perhaps in a church or a palace, or a bourgeois home, but surely not in a museum or a textbook. For Picasso, "The picture-hook is the ruination of a painting. . . . As soon as [a painting] is bought and hung on a wall, it takes on quite a different significance, and the painting is done for."

What purpose did the work serve? To stimulate devotion? To enhance family pride? To teach? To delight? Does the work present a likeness, or express a feeling, or illustrate a mystery?

In what condition has the work survived? Is it exactly as it left the artist's hands, or has it been damaged, repaired, or in some way altered? What evidence of change do I see?

What is the title? Does it help to illuminate the work? Sometimes it is useful to ask yourself, What would I call the work? Picasso called one of his early self-portraits *Yo Picasso*, i.e., "I Picasso," rather than, say, *Portrait of the Artist*, and indeed his title goes well with the depicted self-confidence. Charles Demuth called his picture of a grain elevator in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, *My Egypt*, a title that nicely evokes both the grandeur of the object (the silo shafts and their cap resemble an Egyptian temple) and a sense of irony (Demuth, longing to be in New York or Paris, was "in exile" in Lancaster). But note that many titles were not given to the work by the artist, and some are positively misleading. Rembrandt's *Night Watch* was given that name at the end of the eighteenth century, when the painting had darkened; it is really a daytime scene. And we have already noticed, on page 3, that one's response to a Rembrandt painting may differ, depending on whether it is titled *Self-Portrait with Saskia* or *The Prodigal Son*. Finally, one should recall that some painters have changed the titles of their works; Edvard Munch first called a picture *Woman Kissing the Neck of a Man*, but later he accepted as its title the suggestion of a friend, *The Vampire*.

If you ask yourself such questions, answers (at least tentative answers) will come to mind. In short, you will have something to

say, something to write when called on to write. Here are some additional questions to ask, first on drawing and painting, then on sculpture, architecture, and photography.

Drawings and Paintings

What is the subject matter? What (if anything) is happening?

Baudelaire said that a **portrait** is "a model complicated by an artist." A portrait, one can say, is not simply a representation; it is also a presentation. In a given portrait, how much of the figure does the artist show, and how much of the available space does the artist cause the figure to occupy? What effects are thus gained? What do the clothes, furnishings, accessories (swords, dogs, clocks, and so forth), background, and angle of the head or the posture of the head and body (as well as the facial expression, of course) contribute to our sense of the personality (intense, or cool, or inviting, or whatever) of the figure portrayed? Does a given artist present a strong sense of a social class (as Frans Hals does in his portraits), or a strong sense of an independent inner life (as Rembrandt does)? Is the view frontal, three-quarter, or profile? (It is usually held that a three-quarter view affords the artist the greatest opportunity to reveal personality.) Is the figure related to the viewer, perhaps by a glance or gesture? If frontal, does it seem to face us in a godlike way, seeing all? If three-quarter, does it suggest motion? If profile, is the emphasis decorative, or psychological? If the picture is a double portrait, does the artist reveal what it is that ties the two figures together?

It is sometimes said that every portrait is a self-portrait; does this portrait seem to reveal the artist in some way? Does the portrait, in fact, reveal anything at all? Looking at John Singer Sargent's portrait entitled *General Sir Ian Hamilton*, the critic Roger Fry said, "I cannot see the man for the likeness." Sargent, by the way, said that he saw an animal in every sitter.

(For a student's discussion of two portraits by Copley, see page 73. For a professional art historian's discussion of Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I, see page 103.)

If the picture is a **still life**, does it suggest opulence, or does it suggest humble domesticity and the benefits of moderation?

Does it imply transience, perhaps by a clock or a burnt-out candle, or even merely by the perishable nature of the objects (food, flowers) displayed? If the picture shows a piece of bread and a glass of wine flanking a vase of flowers, can the bread and wine perhaps be eucharistic symbols, the picture as a whole representing life-everlasting achieved through grace? Is there a contrast between the inertness and sprawl of a dead animal and its vibrant color or texture? Does the work perhaps even suggest, as some of Chardin's dead rabbits do, something close to a reminder of the Crucifixion? Or is all of this allegorizing irrelevant?

In a **landscape**, what is the relation between human beings and nature? Are the figures at ease in nature, or are they dwarfed by it? Are they earthbound, beneath the horizon, or (because the viewpoint is low) do they stand out against the horizon and perhaps seem in touch with the heavens, or at least with open air? If there are woods, are these woods threatening or are they an inviting place of refuge? Exactly what makes these woods either threatening or inviting? If there is a clearing, is the clearing a vulnerable place or is it a place of refuge from ominous woods? Do the natural objects in the landscape somehow reflect the emotions of the figures? If the landscape, as in many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, seems highly realistic, is it also in some ways expressive of spiritual forces? Does the painting emphasize the play of light and the insubstantiality of objects in beautiful spaces, as is usual in the work of Claude Lorraine, Turner, and Monet, or does it emphasize the volume — of hills and trees for example — as is usual in the work of Poussin and van Gogh?

Are the **contour lines** (outlines of shapes) strong and hard, or are they irregular, indistinct, fusing the objects or figures with the surrounding space?

What does the **medium** (the substance on which the artist acted) contribute? If a drawing has been made with a wet medium (e.g., ink applied with a pen, or washes applied with a brush), what has the degree of absorbency of the paper contributed? Are the lines of uniform width, or do they sometimes swell and sometimes diminish, either abruptly or gradually? (Quills and steel pens are more flexible than reed pens.) If the drawing has been made with

a dry medium (e.g., silverpoint, charcoal, chalk, or pencil), what has the smoothness or roughness of the paper contributed? (When crayon is rubbed over textured paper, bits of paper show through, suffusing the dark with light, giving vibrancy.) If the work is a painting, is it in tempera (pigment dissolved in egg, the chief medium of European painting into the later fifteenth century), which usually has a somewhat flat, dry appearance? Because the brush strokes do not fuse, tempera tends to produce forms with sharp edges — or, we might say, because it emphasizes contours it tends to produce colored drawings. Or is the painting done with oil paint, which (because the brush strokes fuse) is better suited than tempera to give an effect of muted light and blurred edges? Thin layers of translucent colored oil glazes can be applied so that light passing through these layers reflects from the opaque ground colors, producing a soft, radiant effect; or oil paint can be put on heavily (*impasto*), giving a rich, juicy appearance. *Impasto* can be applied so thickly that it stands out from the surface and catches the light. Oil paint is thus sometimes considered more painterly than tempera, or, to reverse the matter, tempera is sometimes considered to lend itself to a more linear treatment.

Is the **color** (if any) imitative of appearances, or expressive, or both? (Why did Picasso use white, grays, and black for *Guernica*, when in fact the Spaniards bombarded the Basque town on a sunny day?)

Vincent van Gogh, speaking of his own work, said he sought “to express the feelings of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colors, their mixture and their oppositions, the mysterious vibrations of tones in each other's proximity. . . . To express the thought behind a brow by the radiance of a bright tone against a dark ground.”

Caution: It is often said that *warm colors* (red, yellow, orange) produce a sense of excitement, whereas *cool colors* (blue, green) have a calming effect, but experiments have proved inconclusive; the response to color — despite clichés about seeing red or feeling blue — is highly personal, highly cultural, highly varied. Still, a few things can be said, or at least a few terms can be defined. *Hue* gives the color its name — red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. *Value* (also called *lightness* or *darkness*, *brightness* or *intensity*) refers to rel-

ative lightness or darkness of a hue. When white is added, the value becomes “higher”; when black is added, the value becomes “lower.” The highest value is white; the lowest is black. *Saturation* (also called *hue intensity*) is the strength of a hue — one red is redder than another; one yellow is paler than another. A vivid hue is of high saturation; a pale hue is of low saturation. But note that much in a color’s appearance depends on context. Juxtaposed against green, red will appear redder than if juxtaposed against orange. A gray patch surrounded by white will seem darker than gray surrounded by black.

When we are armed with these terms, we can say, for example, that in his South Seas paintings Paul Gauguin used *complementary colors* (orange and blue, yellow and violet, red and green, i.e., hues that when mixed absorb almost all white light, producing a blackish hue) at their highest values, but it is harder to say what this adds up to. (Gauguin himself said that his use of complementary colors was “analogous to Oriental chants sung in a shrill voice,” but one may question whether the analogy is helpful.) And for several reasons our nerve may fail when we try to talk about the effect of color: Light and moisture cause some pigments to change over the years; the colors of a medieval altarpiece illuminated by flickering candlelight or by light entering from the yellowish translucent (not transparent) glass or colored glass of a church cannot have been perceived as the colors that we perceive in a museum, and, similarly, a painting by van Gogh done in bright daylight cannot have looked to van Gogh as it looks to us on a museum wall. The moral? Be cautious in talking about the effect of color.

What is the effect of **light** in the picture? Does it produce sharp contrasts, brightly illuminating some parts and throwing others into darkness, or does it, by means of gentle gradations, unify most or all of the parts? Does the light seem theatrical or natural, disturbing or comforting? Is light used to create symbolic highlights?

Do the objects or figures share the **space** evenly, or does one overpower another, taking most of the space or the light? What is the focus of the composition? The **composition** — the ordering of the parts into a whole by line, color, and shape — is sometimes

grasped at an initial glance and at other times only after close study. Is the composition symmetrical (and perhaps therefore monumental, or quiet, or rigid and oppressive)? Is it diagonally recessive (and perhaps therefore dramatic or even melodramatic)?

Are figures harmoniously related, perhaps by a similar stance or shared action, or are they opposed, perhaps by diagonals thrusting at each other? Speaking generally, **diagonals** may suggest motion or animation or instability, except when they form a triangle resting on its base, which is a highly stable form. **Horizontal lines** suggest tranquility or stability — think of plains, or of reclining figures. **Vertical lines** — tree trunks thrusting straight up, or people standing, or upright lances as in Velázquez’s *Surrender of Breda* — may suggest a more vigorous stability. **Circular lines** are often associated with motion and sometimes — perhaps especially by men — with the female body and with fertility. It is even likely that Picasso’s *Still-Life on a Pedestal Table*, with its rounded forms, is, as he is reported to have called it, a “clandestine” portrait of one of his mistresses. These simple formulas, however, must be applied cautiously, for they are not always appropriate. Probably it is fair to say, nevertheless, that when a *context* is so established, for instance by means of the title of a picture, these lines may be perceived to bear these suggestions if the suggestions are appropriate.

Does the artist convey **depth**, that is, **recession in space**? If so, how? If not, why not? (Sometimes space is flattened — for example, to convey a sense of otherworldliness or eternity.) Among the chief ways of indicating depth are

1. *overlapping* (the nearer object overlaps the farther);
2. *foreshortening* (as in the recruiting poster, *I Want You*, where Uncle Sam’s index finger, pointing at the viewer, is represented chiefly by its tip, and, indeed, the forearm is represented chiefly by a cuff and an elbow);
3. *contour hatching*, that is, lines or brush strokes that follow the shape of the object depicted, as though a net were placed tightly over the object;
4. *shading or modeling*, that is, representation of body shadows;
5. representation of *cast shadows*;

6. *relative position from the ground line* (objects higher in the picture are conceived of as further away than those lower);
7. *perspective* (parallel lines seem to converge in the distance, and a distant object will appear smaller than a near object of the same size.* Some cultures, however, use a principle of *hierarchical scale*. In such a system a king, for instance, is depicted as bigger than a slave not because he is nearer but because he is more important; similarly, the Virgin in a nativity scene may be larger than the shepherds even though she is behind them);
8. *aerial* — or *atmospheric* — *perspective* (remote objects may seem — depending on the atmospheric conditions — slightly more bluish than similar near objects, and they may appear less intense in color and less sharply defined than nearer objects. Note that aerial perspective does *not* have anything to do with a bird's-eye view). Does the picture present a series of planes, each parallel to the picture surface, or does it, through some of the means just enumerated, present an uninterrupted extension of one plane into depth?

What is the effect of the **shape** and **size** of the work? Because, for example, most still lifes use a horizontal format, a vertical still life may seem relatively monumental. Note too that a larger-than-life portrait will produce an effect (probably it will seem heroic) different from one ten inches high. If you are working from a reproduction be sure, therefore, to ascertain the size of the original.

What is the **scale**, that is, the relative size? A face that fills a canvas will produce a different effect from a face of the same size that is drawn on a much larger canvas; probably the former will seem more expansive or more energetic, even more aggressive.

*In the Renaissance, perspective was used chiefly to create a coherent space and to locate objects within that space, but later artists have sometimes made perspective expressive. Giorgio de Chirico, for example, often gives a distorted perspective that unnerves the viewer. Or consider van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles*. Although van Gogh said that the picture conveyed "rest," viewers find the swift recession disturbing. Indeed, the perspective in this picture is impossible: If one continues the diagonal of the right-hand wall by extending the dark line at the base, one sees that the bed's rear right foot would be jammed into the wall.

Sculpture

For what **purpose** was this object made? To edify the faithful? To commemorate heroism? The purpose of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, was radically changed in 1984, as both the admirers and the foes of the original memorial admit, by the addition of an eight-foot sculpture of three soldiers and a fifty-foot flagpole. Maya Lin's original design called only for a pair of two-hundred-foot black granite walls that join to make a wide V, embracing a gently sloping plot of ground. On the walls, which rise from ground level to a height of ten feet at the vertex, are inscribed the names of the 57,939 Americans who died in Vietnam. Opponents of this design argued that it commemorated the dead but ignored the veterans who survived, and was silent about the justice of the cause. The monument said nothing about heroism, these detractors claimed, in contrast to the Marine Corps Memorial



Maya Lin, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos

across the Potomac River, which consists of a statue of marines raising the American flag on Iwo Jima. (One might reply that the Vietnam Memorial, which records the names of those who died, focuses on individuals, whereas the Marine Corps Memorial focuses on the collective heroism of one branch of the armed services.) The politically conservative *National Review* argued in an editorial that Lin's memorial implied an antiwar stance in its black color and in its V-shaped walls ("the antiwar signal, the V protest made with the fingers"). One respondent wrote that the V should be perceived as "the chevron of the PFC who bore the brunt in the fighting of the war." Other defenders of the original design argued that the site itself — "sacred ground between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial" — adequately testified to the cause. The Federal Fine Arts Commission, which has authority over the design and location of federal monuments, came up with a compromise: The sculpture of the three soldiers and the flagpole were added to the original design, but they were placed near an entrance to the memorial, whereas their proponents wanted the soldiers to form a centerpiece within the triangular plot of land embraced by the walls, and the flagpole to stand at the apex of the V. Advocates of the original design remain unhappy, arguing that it has become a mere backdrop to the figurative sculpture, and that the new composite monument replaces dignity, poignancy, and a symbol of loss with simplistic patriotism or, more bluntly, with a symbol of war. In any case, one cannot doubt that the two factions envisioned different purposes, and the purposes shaped the memorial that each proposed.

What are the **sources** or previous models? How does this piece differ from them?

What does the **pose** imply? Effort? Rest? Arrested motion? Authority? In the Lincoln Memorial, Lincoln sits; in the Jefferson Memorial, Jefferson stands, one foot slightly advanced. Lincoln's pose, as well as his face, suggests weariness, while Jefferson's pose, as well as his faintly smiling face, suggests confidence and action. How relevant to a given sculpture is Rodin's comment that "The body always expresses the spirit for which it is the shell"? If the work is a bust, does it imply a stance or does it seem to float freely?

How forceful or how tenuous is the expression of three-dimensionality?

Are certain bodily features or forms distorted? If so, why? (In most African equestrian sculpture, the rider — usually a chief or an ancestor — dwarfs the horse, in order to indicate the rider's high status.)

To what extent is the **drapery** independent of the body? Does it express or diminish the **volumes** (enclosed spaces, e.g., breasts, knees) that it covers? Does it draw attention to specific points of focus, such as the head or hands? Does it indicate bodily motion or does it provide an independent harmony? What does it contribute to whatever the work expresses? If the piece is a wall or niche sculpture, does the pattern of the drapery help to integrate the work into the facade of the architecture?

What do the **medium** and the **techniques** by which it was shaped contribute? Clay is different from stone or wood, and stone or wood can be rough or they can be polished. Would the statue of Chefren (also called Khafre, Egyptian, third millennium B.C., p. 33) have the same effect if it were in clay instead of in highly polished diorite? Can one imagine Daniel Chester French's marble statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln Memorial, done in stainless steel? What are the associations of the material, and, even more important, what is the effect of the tactile qualities, for example, polished wood versus terra-cotta? Note that the tactile qualities result not only from the medium but also from the **facture**, that is, the process of working on the medium with certain tools. An archaic Greek *kouros* ("youth") may have a soft, warm look not only because of the porous marble but because of traces left, even after the surface was smoothed with abrasives, of the sculptor's bronze punches and (probably) chisels.

Consider especially the distinction between **carving** and **modeling**, that is, between cutting away, to release the figure from the stone or wood, and, on the other hand, building up, to create the figure out of lumps of clay or wax. Rodin's *Walking Man* (p. 106), built up by modeling clay and then cast in bronze, recalls in every square inch of the light-catching surface a sense of the energy that is expressed by the figure. Can one imagine Michelangelo's

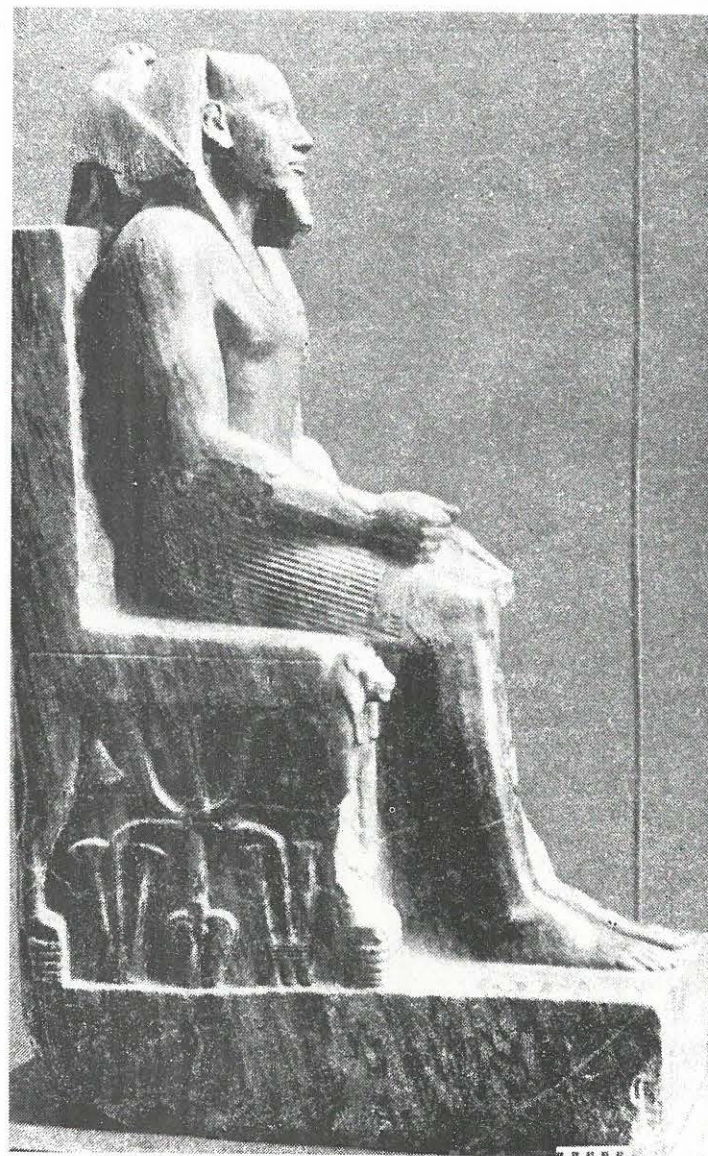
David (p. 16), carved in marble, with a similar surface? Even assuming that a chisel could in fact imitate the effects of modeling, would the surface thus produced catch the light as Rodin's does? And would such a surface suit the pose and facial expression of *David*? Similarly, *King Chefren* was carved; the sculptor, so to speak, cut away from the block everything that did not look like Chefren, whereas *Mercury* (p. 34) was modeled — built up — in clay or wax, and then cast in bronze. The massiveness or stability of *King Chefren* partakes of the solidity of stone, whereas the elegant motion of *Mercury* suggests the pliability of clay, wax, and bronze.

What kinds of volumes are we looking at? Geometric (e.g., cubical, spherical) or irregular? Is the **silhouette** (outline) open or closed? (In Michelangelo's *David*, David's right side is said to be closed because his arm is extended downward and inward; his left side is said to be open because the upper arm moves outward and the lower arm is elevated toward the shoulder. Still, although the form of *David* is relatively closed, the open spaces — especially the space between the legs — emphasize the potential expansion or motion of the figure.) What does the unpierced, thoroughly closed form of *King Chefren*, in contrast to the open form of Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury*, imply about the subject?

What is the effect of **color**, either of the material or of paint? Is color used for realism or for symbolism? Why, for example, in the tomb of Urban VIII, did Giovanni Bernini use bronze for the sarcophagus (coffin), the pope, and Death, but white marble for the figures of Charity and Justice? The whiteness of classical sculpture is usually regarded as suggesting idealized form (though in fact the Greeks tinted the stone and painted in the eyes), but what is the effect of the whiteness of George Segal's plaster casts (p. 35) of ordinary figures in ordinary situations? Blankness?

What is the **size**? *King Chefren* and *David* are larger than life, *Mercury* (sixty-nine inches to the tip of his extended finger) somewhat smaller than life. What does the size contribute to the meaning or effect?

What was the original **site** or physical context (e.g., a pediment, a niche, or a public square)?



Egyptian, *King Chefren*, ca. 2500 B.C. Diorite, 5'6". Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Hirmer Verlag, München)



Giovanni da Bologna. *Mercury*. 1580. Bronze, 69". National Museum, Florence. (Alinari/Art Resource)



George Segal. *The Bus Riders*. 1964. Plaster, metal, and vinyl, 69 × 40 × 76". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966)

Is the **base** a part of the sculpture (e.g., rocks, or a tree trunk that helps to support the figure), and, if so, is it expressive as well as functional? George Grey Barnard's *Lincoln — the Man*, a bronze figure in a park in Cincinnati, stands not on the tall classical pedestal commonly used for public monuments but on a low boulder — a real one, not a bronze copy — emphasizing Lincoln's accessi-

bility, his down-to-earthness. Almost at the other extreme, the flying *Mercury* (p. 34) stands tiptoe on a gust of wind, and at the very extreme, Marino Marini's *Juggler* is suspended above the base, emphasizing the subject's airy skill. Compare, too, the implications in the uneven base of Rodin's *Walking Man* (p. 106) with the implications (echoed in the throne and also in the figure) of the base of *King Chefreden*. Finally, the pedestal of a statue of Lenin, in a railroad station in Leningrad, is an armored car carved out of stone.

What is expressed through the representation? What, for instance, does the highly ordered, symmetrical form of *King Chefreden* suggest about the man? If the sculpture is a head, to what extent is it a portrait, a face revealing a particular appearance and personality at a moment in time? What is the relationship of naturalism to abstraction? If the sculpture represents a deity, what ideas of divinity are expressed? If a human being as a deity (e.g., Alexander the Great as Herakles, or King Chefreden as the son of an Egyptian deity), how are the two qualities portrayed?

Where is the best place (or where are the best places) to stand in order to experience the work? How close do you want to get? Why? What effect on you does the size of the piece have?

While we are thinking about sculpture, it is appropriate to speak a word of caution concerning photographs of sculpture. Photographs, of course, are an enormous aid; we can see details of a work that, even if we were in its presence, might be invisible because the work is high above us on a wall or because it is shrouded in darkness. But one must remember, first, that because a photograph is two-dimensional, it can give little sense of a sculpture in the round; second, that color is omitted or falsified, and distinctive textures are obliterated; third, that the photographer's lighting may be misleading, playing up details that are meant to be subordinate or unduly emphasizing some volumes; fourth, that a photograph may not take account of the angle from which the work was supposed to be seen, as when we look at a photograph of Michelangelo's *Moses*, taken straight-on, though the work was supposed to be above the viewer; finally, that we lose the sense of scale, seeing Michelangelo's *David* (about thirteen feet tall) as no bigger than a toy soldier, unless, as in the unusual photograph on page 16, human viewers are also included.

Architecture

The Roman architect Vitruvius suggested that buildings can be judged according to their *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*, that is, according to their fitness for their purpose, their structural soundness, and their beauty; or, in Richard Krautheimer's version, their function, structure, and design. Much (though not all) of what follows is an amplification of these three topics.

What is the purpose of the building? Is this its original purpose? If not, what was it originally intended for?

Does the building appear today as it did when constructed? Has it been added to, renovated, restored, or otherwise changed in form?

What does the building say? "All architecture," wrote John Ruskin, "proposes an effect on the human mind, not merely a service to the human frame." One can distinguish between function as housing and function as getting across the patron's message. A nineteenth-century bank said, by means of its bulk, its bronze doors, and its barred windows, that your money was safe; and it also said, since it had the facade of a Greek temple, that money was holy. A modern bank, full of glass and color, is more likely to say that money is fun. Some older libraries look like Romanesque churches, and the massive J. Edgar Hoover FBI building in Washington looks like — well, like the FBI. What, then, are the architectural traditions behind the building that contribute to the building's expressiveness? The Boston City Hall (p. 42), for all its modernity and (in its lower part) energetic vitality, is tied together in its upper stories by forceful bands of windows, similar in their effect to a classical building with columns.

Here is how Eugene J. Johnson sees (or hears) Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building (1954–57):

Austere, impersonal, and lavishly bronzed, it sums up the power, personality, and wealth of the modern corporation, whose public philanthropy is symbolized by the piazza in front, with its paired fountains — private land donated to the urban populace. If the piazza and twin fountains call to mind the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, so be it, particularly when one looks out from the Seagram lobby across an open space to the Renaissance-revival facade of McKim, Mead

and White's Racquet Club which quotes the garden facade of Palazzo Farnese! Mies set up a brilliant conversation between two classicizing buildings, bringing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries together without compromise on either part. Mies was in many ways *the* great classicist of this century. One might say that one of his major successes lay in fusing the principles of the great classical tradition of Western architecture with the raw technology of the modern age.

Eugene J. Johnson, "United States of America," in *International Handbook of Contemporary Developments in Architecture*, ed. Warren Sanderson (Westport, Conn.: 1981), p. 506

Notice, by the way, how Johnson fuses *description* (for instance, "lavishly bronzed") with interpretive *analysis* (he sees in the bronze the suggestion of corporate power). Notice, too, how he connects the building with history (the debt of the piazza and twin fountains to the Palazzo Farnese), and how he connects it with its site (the "conversation" with a nearby building).

What is the function of **ornament**, or of any **architectural statuary** in or on or near the building? To emphasize structure? To embellish a surface? To conceal the joins of a surface?

Do the forms and materials of the building relate to its neighborhood? What does the building contribute to the **site**? What does the site contribute to the building? How big is the building in relation to the neighborhood, and in relation to human beings, i.e., what is the **scale**? The Cambridge City Hall (1899; p. 41), atop a slope above the street, crowns the site and announces — especially because it is in a Romanesque style — that it is a bastion of order, even of piety, giving moral significance to the neighborhood below. The Boston City Hall (1965), its lower part in brick, rises out of a brick plaza (p. 42) — the plaza flows into spaces between the concrete pillars that support the building — and seem to invite the crowds from the neighboring shops, outdoor cafés, and marketplace to come in for a look at government of the people by the people, and yet at the same time the building announces its importance.

Does form follow function? For better or for worse? For example, does the function of a room determine its shape? Are there rooms with geometric shapes irrelevant to their purposes? Louis Sullivan said, "Form ever follows function," but Philip Johnson replied, "Forms always follow forms and not function." Is the form



Eero Saarinen, Trans World Airlines Terminal, 1956–62. John F. Kennedy Airport.

symbolic, as it is, for instance, in Eero Saarinen's Trans World Airlines Terminal at Kennedy Airport, where the soaring roof suggests flight?

What is the **structural system**? What **materials** are used in the structure? How do the materials contribute to the building's purpose and statement? The idea that marble confers prestige dies hard: the Sam Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., is clad in marble veneer (costing many millions of dollars) because marble is thought to confer dignity. On the other hand, brick often suggests warmth or unpretentiousness and handcraftsmanship. Do the exterior walls seem hard or soft, cold or warm? Is the sense of hardness or coldness appropriate? (Don't simply assume that metal must look cold.) Does the material in the interior have affinities with that of the exterior? If so, for better or for worse? (Our experience of an interior brick wall may be very different from our experience of an exterior brick wall.)

Does the exterior stand as a massive sculpture, masking the spaces and the activities within, or does it express them? The exterior of the Boston City Hall emphatically announces that the building harbors a variety of activities; in addition to containing offices it contains conference rooms, meeting halls, an exhibition gallery, a reference library, and other facilities. Are the spaces continuous? Or are they static, each volume capped with its own roof?

Does the interior arrangement of spaces say something — for example, is the mayor's office in the city hall on the top floor, indicating that he is above such humdrum activities as dog licensing, which is on the first floor?

In a given room, *what is the function of the walls?* To support the ceiling or the roof? To afford privacy and protection from weather? To provide a surface on which to hang shelves, blackboards, pictures? If glass, to provide a view in — or out?

What is the effect of the floor (wood, tile, brick, marble, carpet)? Notice especially the effect if you move from a room floored with one material (say, wood) to another (say, carpet). Thus, one writer on Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye points out that "The floor of the ramp is finished in paving laid on a diagonal to reinforce the sense of movement in contrast to the orthogonal details of analogous flagstones on the main terrace."

Is the building inviting? The architect Louis Kahn said, "A building should be a . . . stable and *harboring* thing. If you can now [with structural steel] put columns as much as 100 feet apart you may lose more than you gain because the sense of enclosed space disappears." Is the public invited? The Cambridge City Hall has one public entrance, approached by a flight of steps; the Boston City Hall, its lower floor paved with the brick of the plaza, has many entrances, at ground level. What are the implications in this difference?

"There is no excellent Beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." Thus Francis Bacon, in the early seventeenth century. Does the building evoke and then satisfy a sense of curiosity?

What is the role of color? To clarify form? To give sensuous pleasure? To symbolize meaning? Much of the criticism of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial centered on the color of the stone walls.

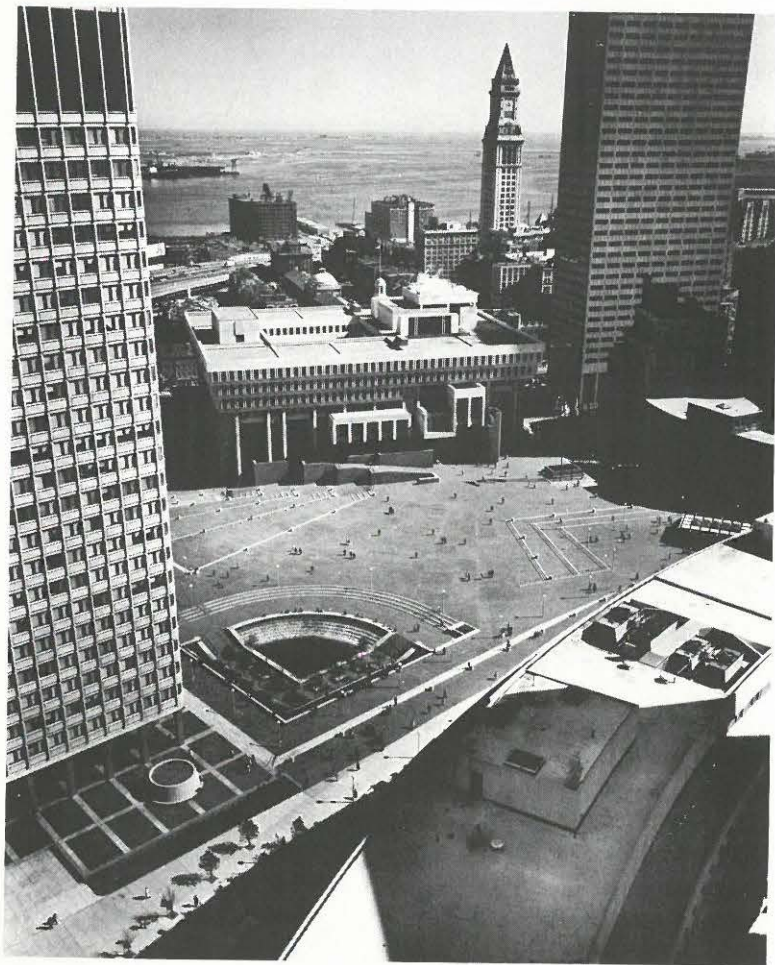


Cambridge City Hall, 1889. Photograph by G. M. Cushing. In *Study of Architectural History in Cambridge, Report Two: Mid-Cambridge* (Cambridge Historical Commission, 1967), p. 44.

One critic, asserting that "black is the universal color of shame [and] sorrow," called for a white memorial.

What part does the changing daylight play in the appearance of the exterior of the building? Does the interior make interesting use of natural light? And how light is the interior? (The Lincoln Memorial, open only at the front, is somber within, but the Jefferson Memorial, admitting light from all sides, is airy and suggestive of Jefferson's rational — sunny, we might say — view of life.)

A few words about the organization of an essay on a building may be useful. Much will depend on your purpose, and on the building, but consider the possibility of using one of these three methods of organization:



City Hall Plaza Center, 1968. Photograph by Cervin Robinson. In *Architecture Boston* (Boston Society of Architects, 1976), p. 6.

1. You might discuss, in this order, *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*, i.e., function, structure, and design (see p. 37).
2. You might begin with a view of the building as seen at a considerable distance, then at a closer view, and then go on to work from the ground up, since the building supports itself this way.
3. You might take, in this order, these topics:
 - a. the materials (smooth or rough, light or dark, etc.).
 - b. the general form, perceived as one walks around the building. (Are the shapes square, rectangular, or circular, or what? Are they simple or complex?)
 - c. the facades, beginning with the entrance. (Is the entrance dominant or recessive? How is each facade organized? Is there variety or regularity among the parts?)
 - d. the relation to the site, including materials and scale.

Photography

First, a few prefatory words. No one today, we can hope, believes that photography is so mechanical a business that a photograph cannot be a work of art. This now discredited view was fostered, ironically, by Kodak: "You press the button, we do the rest." But let's begin with a different simplification, and divide photographers into two schools, **pictorialists** and **reporters**. In the early days of photography, especially in the late nineteenth century, some photographers — we are calling them pictorialists — were not content simply to report images of the world around them. They posed their subjects into compositions resembling those of the Old Masters, and used "Rembrandt lighting," that is, a high side light. Or they photographed moonlit lakes, or rural subjects, watching out for Corot's landscapes and for Millet's peasants laboring in the fields. (The influence went both ways: Corot in the late 1840s seems to have imitated the daguerreotype, whose images of trees are rather blurry or gauzy because of the motion of the leaves during the long exposure.) Moreover, the pictorialists reworked their pictures much as a painter might: They retouched, and they underdeveloped or overdeveloped the negative to produce a desired effect.

Although the most obvious pictorialists are those who, using a soft focus and printing on warm, matte paper, are influenced by mid-nineteenth-century painters and by the Impressionists, many later and utterly different photographs are also pictorial, drawing on the works of later schools of painting. For example, between 1915 and 1930 we get photographs influenced by Cubism, such as Paul Strand's picture of a porch, taken with a tilted camera. Similarly, "abstract" photographs — say, a closeup of a toadstool crossed by a blade of grass, or a detail of a stairway, both of which may appear as almost meaningless patterns of lines and dark and light shapes — are, we can see with hindsight, strongly influenced by the art of their day. The influence of Jean Arp's reliefs and collages, made around the time of World War I, and of Constantin Brancusi's sculpture, is evident ten or fifteen years later in Edward Weston's photographs of a sharply defined, rhythmically shaped object — a green pepper, or a curled-up nude — in a shallow space. Not surprisingly, the abstract photographers tended to use a sharp focus, and they printed their pictures not on matte paper but on cold, hard paper. It is worth noting, too, that some painters, such as Ben Shahn and Charles Sheeler, were also photographers. A photograph by Sheeler, of a cactus with big flat leaves standing on a cylinder in a corner, is virtually identical with one of his paintings; the photograph is no less indebted than the painting to the collages and constructions of Cubist-influenced painters and sculptors, for both images seem almost to have been assembled out of cardboard. And, of course, Sheeler's fondness for monochromatic paintings whose surfaces scarcely seem painterly reveals his frequent reliance, in his paintings, on photographs of his subjects.

Now let's turn to the reporters, the "straight" photographers, the supposedly objective people who give us the stuff of ordinary life, unposed. We seem to be turning from Beauty to Truth, or (if one wants to say that all art communicates truth) from Ideal Truth to the Truth of the Moment. But, it is evident, a photograph does not have to look like an Impressionist painting or a Rembrandt portrait or a Millet genre scene to be called pictorial. A scene of a woman at work in a mill may at first glance appear to be simply a document, a report valuable for the message that it records rather than for its inherent beauty; yet it, too, if it holds us, probably does so largely by its form. Even a newspaper photograph or an ama-

teur's snapshot does not in fact record the object as it really is. It records what you would see if you had only one eye and stood at a particular place at a particular time of day, and if what you saw was printed on a particular kind of paper. To take the most obvious points of mind over mechanism: The photographer selects the subject, the time at which to photograph it (hence the lighting), and the composition, for in taking a photograph one backs up a little, shifts to the left a bit, bends one's legs, waits for the right moment, and so forth. As Antonioni said, "Every camera position represents a moral decision." Granted, "pictorial" photographs are more obviously personal or subjective than are the photographs of reporters, but no photograph taken by a human being can be utterly "objective." Most of the reporters, then, can say with the photographer Minor White, "I don't take pictures, I make them."

Many of the questions on drawing and painting (pp. 23–28) — for example, those on line (edges may be hard or soft), composition, and even color — can be usefully asked of photographs too. Here, however, are a few additional questions.

Does the picture yield all that it has to offer in a glance? Or does the picture sustain and perhaps increase its initial appeal with repeated viewings? Why? Because of the composition, or interesting forms, especially of light and dark? (More about composition in a moment.) Symbolism? Detail (e.g., a face that, whatever its character, is a fascinating map)? Revelation of character, not only through the face but through posture, gesture, and setting (including the angle of vision and the lighting)? Anecdote (or narrative)? Irony, or humor?

Does the photograph capture what Henri Cartier-Bresson calls the "**decisive moment**"? The term alludes not only to an action at its peak but also to the moment when all elements in the composition come together to reveal a formal — usually geometric — beauty. Cartier-Bresson writes, "I have a passion for geometry. My greatest joy is the surprise of facing a beautiful organization of forms." On the other hand, one can find pictures that appeal not because they have the order of geometry but, so to speak, the messy order of life.

Does the **angle of vision** (eye level, or slightly or greatly above or below eye level) say something?



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Matisse*, 1944. (Magnum)

Does **light** give meaning to the subject. Does light reveal a new aspect of a commonplace subject?

Is the **focus** expressive? Certain parts of the picture may be out of focus, to concentrate a viewer's attention on the focused parts, or to convey, perhaps, a dreamlike quality. If movement is blurred, is the blurring effective?

Is the choice of **print-size** expressive? The print of a photograph may be one inch square, or it may cover a wall.

What **process** was used? The differences among photographic processes can be very great. For instance, albumen prints are smooth, slightly glossy, clear in details, and rich in subtle gradations of tone. Platinum prints are matte, silvery-gray or bluish-gray, and without intense shadows or highlights.

If you are more than a casual photographer, you may want to ask: How did the photographer get this effect? What kind of lens, or aperture setting, or filter, or film, did the photographer use, and why? Has the picture been cropped, and why?

Another Look at the Questions

In short, you can stimulate responses (and understanding) by asking yourself two kinds of questions:

1. *What is this doing?* Why is this figure here and not there? Why is the work in bronze rather than in marble? Or put it this way: What is the artist up to?
2. *Why do I have this response?* Why do I find this landscape oppressive, this child sentimental but that child fascinating? That is, how did the artist manipulate the materials in order to produce the strong feelings that I experience?

The first of these questions (What is this doing?) requires you to identify yourself with the artist, wondering, perhaps, whether pen is better than pencil for this drawing, or watercolor better than oil paint for this painting. One senses that Eugene J. Johnson may have put to himself questions of this sort before making the following points about Eero Saarinen's Terminal Building at Dulles International Airport (1958–62):

Rising majestically out of the flat countryside, the broad, low structure echoes, in its strong horizontal roof supported by regularly spaced posts, the classical architecture of Washington, and perhaps even the great porch of George Washington's house at nearby Mount Vernon. Indeed, the whole terminal is a porch. Departing or arriving, the traveler experiences the building as a semi-enclosed space that lies between the enclosed space of the airplane or of the bus that brings the traveler to the terminal proper and the open Virginia landscape that waits outside.

International Handbook of Contemporary Developments in Architecture, ed. Warren Sanderson (Westport, Conn.: 1981), p. 509

Sometimes artists tell us what they are up to. Van Gogh, for example, in a letter to his brother, helps us to understand why he put a blue background behind the portrait of a blond artist: "Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by the simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky." But, of course, you cannot rely

Doonesbury



BY GARRY TRUDEAU



Doonesbury, August 28, 1985. Copyright 1985 G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.

on the artist's statement of intention; the intention may not be fulfilled in the work itself.

The second question (Why do I have this response?) requires you to trust your feelings. If you are amused or repelled or unnerved or soothed, assume that these responses are appropriate and follow them up — but not so rigidly that you exclude the possibility of other, even contradictory feelings. (The important complement to “Trust your feelings” is “Trust the work of art.” The study of art ought to enlarge feelings, not merely confirm them.)

Questions like these are not childish; excellent scholars have left traces of them in their writings. Nikolaus Pevsner, for example, writes of Michelangelo's sculptures in the ducal tombs in the Medici Chapel:

The question has often been asked what made him keep the untreated stone below his reclining figures of *Day and Night* and *Morning and Evening*. The answer is that he wanted to let them appear in the act of coming to life out of a stony, subhuman preexistence. To shape the image of man entirely liberated from these dark forces must have seemed almost a sacrilege to the young and again the very old Michelangelo. Hence also his many unfinished works.

“The Architecture of Mannerism,” *The Mint*, I (1946); in *Readings in Art History*, 2d ed., ed. Harold Spencer (New York: Scribner's, 1976), II, 121

Here is another example; this time the writer asks a question but can't answer it. Kenneth Clark is talking about Rembrandt's *Samson Betrayed by Delilah*.

Incidentally, the Macbeth-like figure in the back must be one of the earliest representations in art of a kilt and plaid. How did Rembrandt come by it? Had he seen a drawing of a Highlander, or is it based on some engraving of a barbarian on Trajan's column?

An Introduction to Rembrandt
(New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 54

Someday an art historian will turn up a convincing answer, and it will help us — even though only to a tiny degree — better to understand Rembrandt's art.

In fact, art-historical research is largely an attempt to explain certain results — let's say, the new style of painting that arose in

Flanders in about 1420 — by setting forth causes. That is, the historian asks, Why, and searches for explanations.

FORMAL ANALYSIS OR DESCRIPTION?

First, it should be understood that the word *formal* in “formal analysis” is not used as the opposite of *informal*, as in a formal dinner or a formal dance. Rather, a formal analysis is an analysis of the form the artist produces, that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning. Second, it should be mentioned that sometimes a distinction is made between formal analysis — an analysis of the configuration of the artistic object itself — and stylistic analysis — an analysis that can include discussion of similar features in related objects; but we need not preserve this distinction.

Is the term *formal analysis* merely a pretentious substitute for *description*? Not quite. A description deals with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see: “A woman in a white dress sits at a table, reading a letter. Behind her, . . .” It can also comment on the execution of the work (“thick strokes of paint,” “the highly polished surface”), but it does not offer inferences and it does not evaluate. A description tells us, for example, that the head of a certain portrait sculpture “faces front; the upper part of the nose and the rim of the right earlobe are missing. . . . The closely cropped beard and mustache are indicated by short random strokes of the chisel,” and so forth.

These statements, from an entry in the catalog of an exhibition, are all true and they can be useful, but they scarcely reveal the thought, the reflectiveness, that we associate with analysis. When the entry in the catalog goes on, however, to say that “the surfaces below the eyes and cheeks are sensitively modeled to suggest the soft, fleshly forms of age,” we begin to feel that now indeed we are reading an analysis. Similarly, although the statement that “the surface is in excellent condition” is purely descriptive (despite the apparent value judgment in “excellent”), the statement that the

“dominating block form” of the portrait contributes to “the impression of frozen tension” can reasonably be called analytic.

Much of any formal analysis will inevitably consist of description (“The pupils of the eyes are turned upward”), and accurate descriptive writing itself requires careful observation of the object and careful use of words. But an essay is a formal analysis rather than a description only if it seeks to show *how* the described object works. For example, “The pupils of the eyes are turned upward, suggesting a heaven-fixed gaze, or, more bluntly, suggesting that the figure is divinely inspired.”

Another way of putting it is to say that analysis tries to answer the somewhat odd-sounding question, “*How* does the work mean?” Thus, the following paragraph is chiefly analytic rather than descriptive. The author has made the point that a Protestant church emphasizes neither the altar nor the pulpit; “as befits the universal priesthood of all believers,” he says, it is essentially an auditorium. He then goes on to analyze the ways in which a Gothic cathedral says or means something very different:

The focus of the space on the interior of a Gothic cathedral is . . . compulsive and unrelievedly concentrated. It falls, and falls exclusively, upon the sacrifice that is re-enacted by the mediating act of priest before the altar-table. So therefore, by design, the first light that strikes the eye, as one enters the cathedral, is the jewelled glow of the lancets in the apse, before which the altar-table stands. The pulsating rhythm of the arches in the nave arcade moves toward it; the string-course moldings converge in perspective recession upon it. Above, the groins of the apse radiate from it; the ribshafts which receive them and descend to the floor below return the eye inevitably to it. It is the single part of a Gothic space in which definiteness is certified. In any other place, for any part which the eye may reach, there is always an indefinite beyond, which remains to be explored. Here there is none. The altar-table is the common center in which all movement comes voluntarily to rest.

John F. A. Taylor, *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts* (New York: Dover, 1964), pp. 115–17

In this passage the writer is telling us, analytically, *how* the cathedral means.

STYLE AS THE SHAPER OF FORM

This chapter has in large measure been talking about style, and it is now time to define this elusive word. The first thing to say about **style** is that the word is *not* used by most art historians to convey praise, as in "He has style." Rather, it is used neutrally, for everyone and everything made has a style — good, bad, or indifferent. The person who, as we say, "talks like a book" has a style (probably an annoying one), and the person who keeps saying "Uh, you know what I mean" has a style too (different, but equally annoying). Similarly, whether we wear jeans or painter's pants or gray flannel slacks, we have a style in our dress. We may claim to wear any old thing, but in fact we don't; there are clothes we wouldn't be caught dead in. The clothes we wear are expressive; they announce that we are police officers or bankers or tourists or college students — or at least they show what we want to be thought to be, as when in the sixties many young middle-class students wore tattered clothing, thus showing their allegiance to the poor and their enmity toward what was called the Establishment. It is not silly to think of our clothing as a sort of art that we make. Once we go beyond clothing as something that merely serves the needs of modesty and that provides protection against heat and cold and rain, we get clothing whose style is expressive.

To turn now to our central topic, style in art, we can all instantly tell the difference between a picture by van Gogh and one by Norman Rockwell or Walt Disney, even though the subject matter of all three pictures may be the same, for instance, a seated woman. How can we tell? By the style, that is, by line, color, medium, and so forth — all of the things we talked about earlier in this chapter. Walt Disney's figures tend to be built up out of circles and ovals (think of Mickey Mouse), and the color shows no modeling or traces of brush strokes; Norman Rockwell's methods of depicting figures are different, and van Gogh's are different in yet other ways. Similarly, a Chinese landscape, painted with ink on silk or on paper, simply cannot look like a van Gogh landscape done with oil paint on canvas, partly because the materials prohibit such identity and partly because the Chinese painter's vision of landscape

(usually lofty mountains) is not van Gogh's vision. Their works "say" different things. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it, "A change of style is a change of subject."

We recognize certain *distinguishing characteristics* (from large matters, such as choice of subject and composition, to small matters, such as kinds of brush strokes) that mark an artist, or a period, or a culture, and these constitute the style. Almost anyone can distinguish between a landscape painted by a Chinese and one painted by van Gogh. But it takes considerable familiarity with the styles of Chinese painting to be able to say, "This is a Chinese painting of the seventeenth century, in fact the late seventeenth century. It belongs to the Nanking School and is a work by Kung Hsien — not by a follower, and certainly not a copy, but the genuine article."

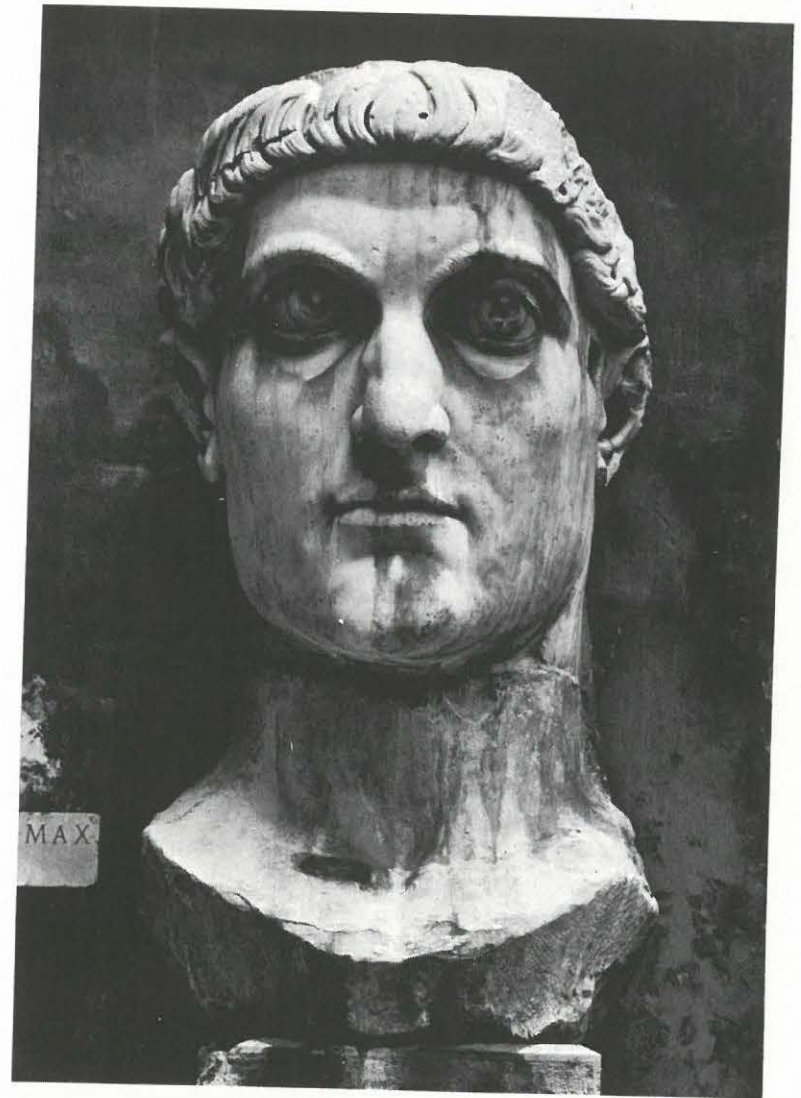
Style, then, is revealed in **form**; an artist creates form by applying certain techniques to certain materials, in order to embody a particular vision or content. In different ages people have seen things differently: the nude body as splendid, or the nude body as shameful; Jesus as majestic ruler, or Jesus as the sufferer on the cross; landscape as pleasant, domesticated countryside, or landscape as wild nature. So the chosen subject matter is not only part of the content, but is also part of that assemblage of distinguishing characteristics that constitutes a style.

All of the elements of style, finally, are expressive. Take ceramics as an example. The kind of clay, the degree of heat at which it is baked, the decoration or glaze (if any), the shape of the vessel, the thickness of its wall, all are elements of the potter's style, and all contribute to the expressive form. But every expressive form is not available in every age; certain visions, and certain technologies, are, in certain ages, unavailable. Porcelain, as opposed to pottery, requires a particular kind of clay and an extremely high temperature in the kiln, and these were simply not available to the earliest Japanese potters. In fact, even the potter's wheel was not available to them; they built their pots by coiling ropes of clay and then, sometimes, they smoothed the surface with a spatula. The result is a kind of thick-walled, low-fired ceramic that expresses energy and earthiness, far different from those delicate Chinese porcelains that express courtliness and the power of technology (or, we might say, of art).

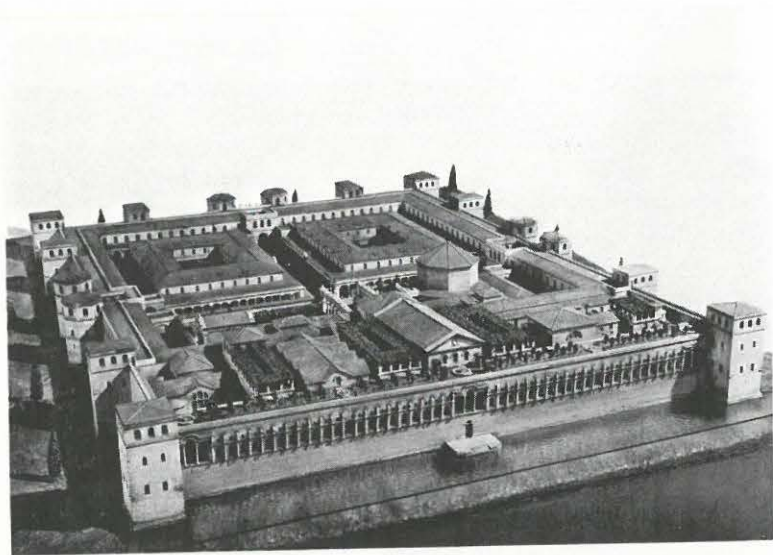
PERSONAL STYLE AND PERIOD STYLE

Although each work that an artist produces is an individual work, it is evident that there must be family resemblances among the works, for not even the greatest artists can totally escape the limitation of their age and of their own vision. And so we can reasonably speak of van Gogh's style, or, in an effort to be more precise, of his early or late style, or of his style in still life and of his style in portraiture. We recognize that each work has individual traits, but we find some connections among works. No one questions the usefulness of talking about an artist's personal style — well, no one except Picasso, who denied that he had a style and who liked to believe that each work was a new answer to a new problem.

How useful is it, however, to speak not of the personal style of an individual artist but of the style of a century or so, that is, of a *period style*? The term, of course, has some validity, for the works of a period at least to some degree share certain features, for reasons of materials and technology, most obviously, but also perhaps because of a shared vision. One may see a resemblance, for instance, between the sculpture and the architecture of a given period. Let's take as an example Roman sculpture and architecture of the early fourth century, but first we must briefly look at what preceded it. Roman portrait sculpture of the first two and a half centuries A.D. shows a personality *in time*, caught in the act of raising an eyebrow, or frowning, or looking at the viewer. The face, therefore, is not strictly symmetrical, and the hair, whose texture is suggested, usually seems slightly disordered or at least not highly disciplined. And if we take as an example of architecture Hadrian's palace at Tivoli, we find that its buildings are arranged rather freely, not with strict symmetry. But when we turn to Roman sculpture and architecture at the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, we find something different. Roman portrait sculpture now shows faces removed from the world of time. The faces are more strictly symmetrical, the hair much more severely patterned, the eyes unnaturally large and staring, the whole face somewhat cubic and masklike rather than highly imitative of a natural form. The eight-foot-high head of Constantine the Great (A.D. 330) is an example



Roman, *Constantine the Great*, ca. A.D. 330. Marble, 8'6". Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Hirmer Verlag, München)



Palace of Diocletian, A.D. 300–305. Spalato (Split). Reconstruction by E. Hebrard. (Alinari/Art Resource)

of this later Roman style; nothing like it existed in the previous two and a half centuries. And this change in sculpture seems to be paralleled by a change in architecture, for Diocletian's palace at Spalato (A.D. 300–305, in Yugoslavia) is strictly symmetrical, a massive, seemingly impenetrable block.

And so it can be argued that in a given period we see a stylistic similarity — a period style — in different kinds of works of art. Moreover, one can argue that this massive, cubic, consolidated style reflects the spirit of the age, for Constantine, an absolute ruler, established a centralized bureaucracy and did much to unify the Roman Empire.

Yet, a word of caution is necessary in a discussion of period style. Most of us have a tendency to try to make order out of chaos, to see connections even where there may not be connections, and historians (including art historians) are not exceptions. For instance, the historian who tries to catch the spirit of the age of the Gothic period may tell us that it can be seen not only in its painting,

sculpture, and architecture but also in its philosophy. The assumption (often unstated) is that all of the activities of a period *must* be related, or, to put it in other words, that there *is* a period style. Thus, it has been said that Gothic art is fond of innumerable subdivisions and multiplicity of forms and that we find these qualities not only in a cathedral but also in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. But how far can we push this idea that a period manifests a spirit in all of its productions? The very term *Gothic period* is a historian's invention, an attempt to impose order. Having imposed this simplification, the historian then begins to feel a bit uneasy and distinguishes between Early Gothic and Late Gothic, then between Early English Gothic and Early French Gothic, and so on. Is there really an all-embracing style in a given period? One can be skeptical, and a simple analogy may be useful. A family often consists of radically different personalities: improvident husband, patient wife, one son an idler and the other a go-getter, one daughter wise in her choice of career and the other daughter unwise. And yet all may have come from the same culture. Or take the individual: A man may have wretched table manners, but he may also paint beautifully.

A Gothic painting, of course, resembles other Gothic paintings infinitely more than it resembles a painting by Rembrandt, and a Gothic painting may bear some resemblances to Gothic architecture. It may even in some ways resemble medieval law — but then again, it may not. We do well when we try to see the hidden connections between things, but we do badly when we suppress the rich, individualizing details that give a work its value and we see only some forced and not very interesting similarity. It is useful to keep in mind Bishop Butler's words: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing."

SAMPLE ESSAYS: TWO FORMAL ANALYSES

The first analysis, by an undergraduate, includes a good deal of description and is conspicuously impersonal, but notice that even this apparently dispassionate assertion of facts is shaped by a *thesis*: The sculpture successfully combines a highly conventional symmetrical style, on the one hand, with mild asymmetry and a degree of realism on the other.

The second analysis, also by an undergraduate, is somewhat more personal (notice the opening sentence), but it, too, is chiefly a report on the object (how the form expresses content) rather than a report of casual impressions.

Stephen Beer

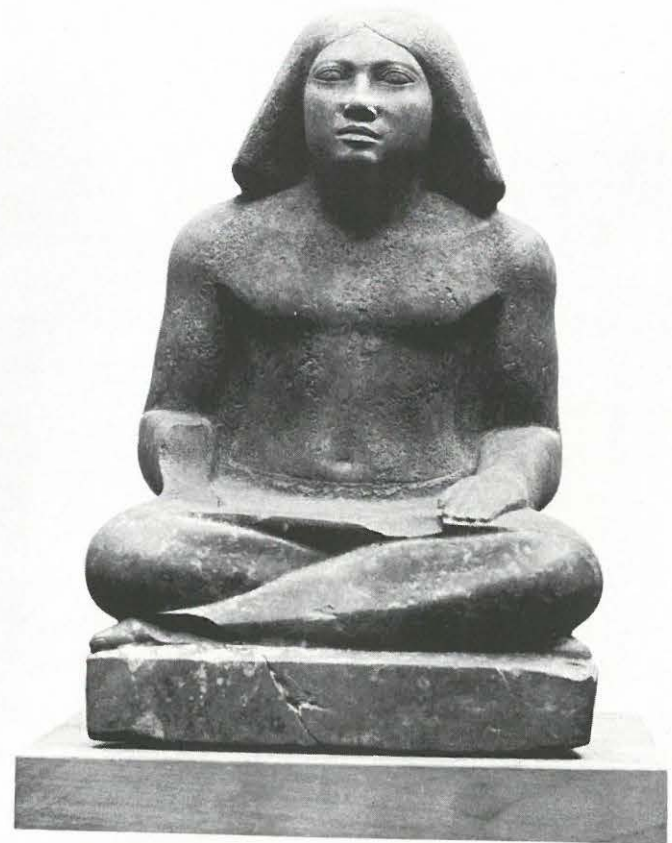
Formal Analysis: Prince Khunera as a Scribe

Prince Khunera as a Scribe, a free-standing Egyptian sculpture twelve inches tall, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was found at Giza in a temple dedicated to the father of the prince, King Mycerinus. The limestone statue may have been a tribute to that Fourth Dynasty king.¹ The prince, sitting cross-legged with a scribal tablet on his lap, rests his hands on his thighs. He wears only a short skirt or kilt.

The statue is in excellent condition although it is missing its right forearm and hand. Fragments of the left leg and the scribe's tablet also have been lost. The lack of any difference in the carving between the bare stomach and the kilt suggests that these two features were once differentiated by contrasting paint that has now faded, but the only traces of paint remaining on the figure are bits of black on the hair and eyes.

The statue is symmetrical, composed along a vertical axis which runs from the crown of the head into the base of the sculpture. The sculptor has relied on

¹Museum label.



Egyptian, *Seated Statue of Prince Khunera (or Khuenre) as a Scribe*, Dynasty IV (2599–2571 B.C.). Yellow limestone, 12". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Harvard-Boston Expedition)

basic geometric forms in shaping the statue on either side of this axis. Thus, the piece could be described as a circle (the head) within a triangle (the wig) which sits atop a square and two rectangles (the torso, the crossed legs, and the base). The reliance on basic geometric forms reveals itself even in details. For example, the forehead is depicted as a small triangle within the larger triangular form of the headdress.

On closer inspection, however, one observes that the rigidity of both this geometric and symmetric organization is relieved by the artist's sensitivity to detail and by his ability as a sculptor. None of the shapes of the work is a true geometric form. The full, rounded face is more of an oval than a circle, but actually it is neither. The silhouette of the upper part of the body is defined by softly undulating lines that represent the muscles of the arms and that modify the simplicity of a strictly square shape. Where the prince's naked torso meets his kilt, just below the waist, the sculptor has suggested portliness by allowing the form of the stomach to swell slightly. Even the "circular" navel is flattened into an irregular shape by the suggested weight of the body. The contours of the base, a simple matter at first glance, actually are not exactly four-square but rather are slightly curvilinear. Nor is the symmetry on either side of the vertical axis perfect: Both the mouth and the nose are slightly askew; the right and left fore-

arms originally struck different poses; and the left leg is given prominence over the right. These departures from symmetry and from geometry enliven the statue, giving it both an individuality and a personality.

Although most of the statue is carved in broad planes, the sculptor has paid particular attention to details in the head. There he attempted to render precisely and with apparent descriptive accuracy the details of the prince's face. The parts of the eye, for example - the eyebrow, eyelids, eyeballs, and sockets - are distinct. Elsewhere the artist has not worked in such probing detail. The breasts, for example, are rendered in large forms, the nipples being absent. The attention to the details of the face suggests that the artist attempted to render a lifelikeness of the prince himself.

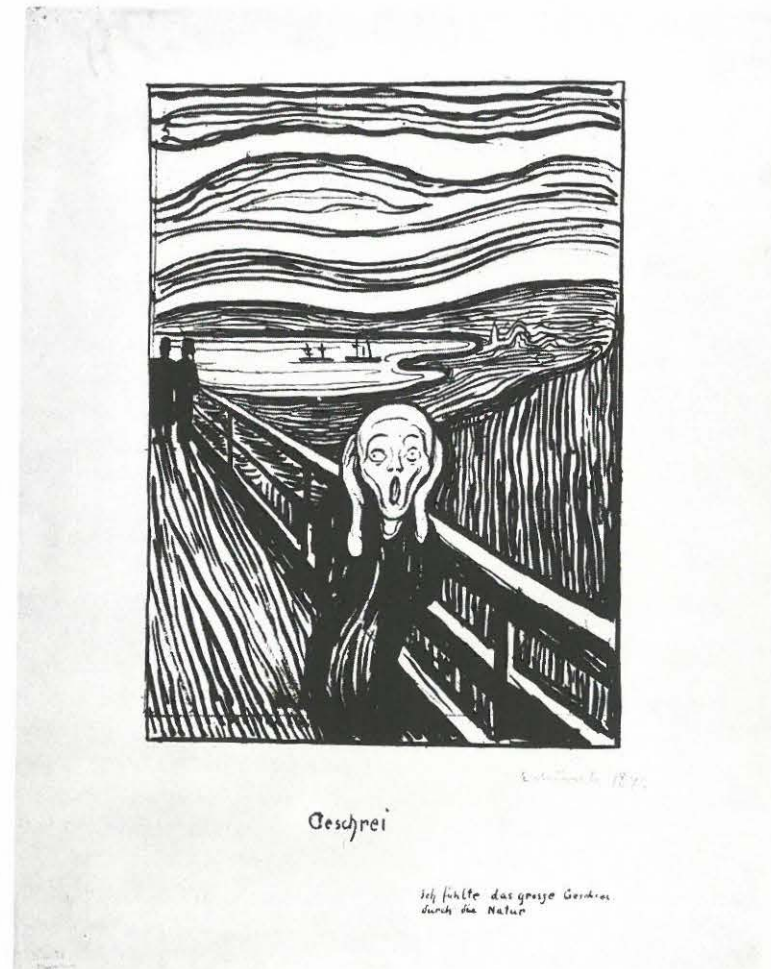
The prince is represented in a scribe's pose but without a scribe's tools. The prince is not actually doing anything. He merely sits. The absence of any open spaces (for example, between the elbows and the waist) contributes to the figure's composure or self-containment. But if he sits, he sits attentively: There is nothing static here. The slight upward tilt of the head and the suggestion of an upward gaze of the eyes give the impression that the alert prince is attending someone else, perhaps his father the king. The suggestion in the statue is one of imminent work rather than of work in process.

Thus, the statue, with its variations from geometric order, suggests the presence, in stone, of a particular man. The pose may be standard and the outer form may appear rigid at first, yet the sculptor has managed to depict an individual. The details of the face and the overfleshed belly reveal an intent to portray a person, not just a member of the scribal profession. Surely when freshly painted these elements of individuality within the confines of conventional forms and geometric structure were even more compelling.

Joan Daremo

Edvard Munch's The Scream

Is there a more unnerving work of art than Munch's lithograph of 1896? Even his painting of the same subject, two years earlier, by virtue of its color (rather than severely contrasting black and white spaces) seems less filled with anguish. This lithograph is almost unbearably agitated: Although the two little boats seem to rest easily on the water, our eyes cannot rest on them, for the thrusting diagonals pull the eyes to the left rear, yet the compelling picture of the central anguished figure pulls them forward again. Perhaps there is some calm in the heavens (although even in the sky the vigorous undulating horizontal lines are full of motion) as well as in the water, but the isolated figure in the center is



Edvard Munch. *The Scream* (or *The Shriek*), 1896. Lithograph, printed in black, 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ " \times 15 $\frac{13}{16}$ ". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Matthew T. Mellon Fund)

surrounded by, and seems assaulted by, strongly conflicting lines – at the right, verticals that crash into horizontals, and at the left, the diagonals.

At the left, too, walking out of the picture and thus away from the chief figure, two figures stand near each other, forming, we might say, the society from which the central figure is excluded. But even these two figures are separated from each other by a narrow space (this is not a world in which someone can put an arm on another's shoulder) and, more important, by the fact that they are looking in different directions. These two stiff passersby apparently muse on the water, but the screaming wobbly figure, whose bones seem to have dissolved from terror, averts its eyes from (and closes its ears to) the seething surrounding world; it (the figure seems sexless, almost a skull, though some people perceive a female) faces nothing but us, or, rather, the empty space which we occupy, for its eyes are not focused together.

3

Writing a Comparison

THE USES OF COMPARISON

Analysis frequently involves comparing: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Strictly speaking, if one emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities, one is contrasting rather than comparing, but we need not preserve this distinction; we can call both processes *comparing*.

Although your instructor may ask you to write a comparison of two works of art, the *subject* of the essay is the *works*. *Comparison* is simply an effective analytic *technique* to show some of the qualities of the works. For example, in a course in architecture you may compare two subway stations (considering the efficiency of the pedestrian patterns, the amenities, and the esthetic qualities), with the result that you may come to understand both of them more fully; but a comparison of a subway station with a dormitory, no matter how elegantly written the comparison is, can hardly teach the reader or the writer anything.

Art historians almost always use comparison in discussing authenticity: A work of uncertain attribution is compared with undoubtedly genuine works, on the assumption that if the uncertain work, when closely compared with genuine works, somehow is markedly different, perhaps in brush technique, it is probably not genuine despite superficial similarities of, say, subject matter and medium. (This assumption can be challenged — a given artist may