

Formal Analysis of Art
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HOW TO WRITE and/or TALK ABOUT A WORK OF ART

1. Consider the Formal Elements of Design:

LINE

What are the characteristics of the line?...thick, thin; smooth, jerky; hard, soft; angular, curvilinear. Does the line suggest motion or direction? What about qualities?...expressive/emotional; intellectual; analytic. Is there a ground line or horizon line? Is the line implied or actual? Are there lines of sight?

SHAPE

A line that encloses an area is a shape. What kind of shapes has the artist created?...angular, rounded; geometric, organic; complex, simple; regular, irregular; large, small. Is there an emphasis on positive or negative shapes?

SPACE, MASS, and VOLUME

(2-d) Does the artwork suggest the illusion of space or is it flat, rendering a conceptual or decorative quality? Is there an aerial or linear perspective system used? What is the angle of view (straight across, above, below)?

(3-d) Does the sculpture emphasize solids or voids? Is it compact or does it extend into space? If a relief, is the carving shallow or deep?

LIGHT and VALUE

Are changes in value (highlight to dark shades) modeled to suggest three-dimensionality? Are the transitions abrupt or gradual?

COLOR

Do the colors primarily describe the forms or are they used expressively, decoratively, or symbolically? Are the colors mostly warm (having more red/yellow dominance) or cool (having more blue/green dominance)? Are there areas of distinct warm/cool contrast? Is the palette based on primary (red, yellow, blue) or secondary (orange, green, violet) colors? Is the overall effect of the color composition vibrant or subdued.

TEXTURE

Are the textures smooth, rough; hard, soft; wet, dry? Are the textures realistic or imaginative?

2. Now ask yourself how these formal elements are organized based on the **Principles of Design**:

COMPOSITION

Composition is the arrangement of all of the elements of the artwork; the placement of positive and negative shapes within the format. How did the artist use all of the formal elements to compose their work?

BALANCE

Is there balance or imbalance? If balance, is it achieved by a symmetrical, asymmetrical or radial arrangement? Where is the focal point if there is one? How are the optical weights distributed? Each shape, color, texture has an optical weight, e.g. dark colors and rough edges are heavier optically than light colors and smooth edges. Clustered shapes convey more optical weight than disbursed shapes.

RHYTHM

Has the artist created rhythm? ... used repetition of elements, creating a simple pattern; or used similar designs, creating a complex pattern? Flowing/continuous or static/contained?

SCALE and PROPORTION

Scale is the size relationship between the artwork and the viewer. Proportion is the size relationships among various parts within the work and between the parts and the whole. Are scale and proportion used naturally/objectively or artificially/subjectively?

UNITY and VARIETY

How does the artist create a sense of unity among the formal elements? Ways may include parallel direction; symmetry/ asymmetry; transition; dark/light or warm/cool opposition; similarities of shape, position, color; focal point; repetition; counterbalance.

3. What is the subject matter? How does your own interpretation of the subject influence how you read the work?

4. What is the choice of medium? How does the choice of medium contribute to the aesthetic of the work? (could the same effect be achieved with other mediums? If more than one medium is used, how do they work together?)

5. Finally consider what the artist is trying to say about the subject matter. What feelings or attitudes does the composition seem to evoke? Do the formal elements reinforce the meaning you feel the artist wanted us to understand? How, or how not?