

## **Analysing works of art**

Below is a guide line for how to conduct a formal analysis of a work of art. This is often used as a tool to understand art works, and any good art historian can use it to look at a painting he has never seen before and place it fairly accurately as to the time and place it was made.

When looking at contemporary art from Africa, it throws up other questions, that a formal analysis does not necessarily deal with, and highlights that fact the formal analysis is a tool developed by art historians in the western world. It also does not include our own stand-point as a bias or examine how art is perceived in society.

Once you have gone through a formal analysis (you can do this more or less thoroughly) consider and discuss the following questions:

- Consider whether we know enough about an artist's time/place/environment to understand the work? Does it matter?
  - Can/should artwork be used to illustrate something that the artist did not intend when he/she created the work? Why/why not - pros and cons?
  - How far from the artist's intentions is acceptable to move if the work is used in other contexts?
  - How important is the artist's own thoughts on the work on the viewer's perception of the work?
  - Do African artist employ the same expressions as Western artists?
  - Can a western image analysis be used - why/why not/what parts?
  - What does our way of interpretation say about us/our training, views on art/our surroundings?
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## **Formal analysis**

### **1. Basic facts**

- Who made the work
- What medium is it made in
- Does it have a title
- When was it painted

### **2. Subject matter / Description**

Describe the work objectively. This section should answer the question: "What do you see?"

- Location, environment, people, relationships, gestures, facial expressions, significant details, etc.

### 3. Formal qualities

Describe the formal qualities of the work. Line, color, brushwork or "handling," tactile values, volumes, modeling, proportion, perspective or special construction, and composition are all ways to talk about the way the artist has conveyed his subject and given his personal interpretation.

Good artists want to see problems in fresh ways and find new solutions. An analysis of any artwork in terms of these formal qualities is called formal analysis. You can do an enjoyable formal analysis of any artwork without "knowing" anything about it. It can be useful to ask "How did the artist do it?":

- What materials are used / how is the work is constructed (e.g. priming)
- What lines are in the work (horizontal, vertical)
- Foreground/middle ground/background)
- Which perspective is used - bird's eye view, worm's-eye view or straight on?
- What colors are used (cold, warm, dark, bright, clear)
- What is the atmosphere of the work?
- Does the work contain symbols and if so, which, and do they have a meaning?

### 4. Style

Style is the sum total of an artwork's formal qualities. Every work of art has its own style, that is, it looks different from almost every other work of art. Every good artist also has a style, which can be differentiated from that of other artists. In a broader sense, every country, city, century or decade has a style. So there is personal style, national style, and historical style.

### 5. Interpretation

This section should answer the question, "Why did the artist create it and what does it mean." Based on the different elements of the analysis consider the following:

- What does the artist wishes to express its image? How is it corroborated it by color, light, composition, etc.
- Why was the picture made? (Propaganda, ordering, inspiration, book illustration, holiday photo?)
- Why is the image made the way it is?
- What thoughts, moods and emotions does the work convey? (joy, anxiety, confidence, romance, horror, chaos, etc. Which attitudes are expressed?)
- Evidence: What evidence inside or outside the artwork supports my interpretation?

### 6. Context

- Relate the work to other works by the artist
- Relate the work to the artists life and era
- Relate the work to works by other artists and art movement and/or styles. Is the work typical of a certain time? Nation? Or of a certain social group?
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## **7. Judgement**

- What do you think about the work? Is it a good work of art?
- Criteria: What criteria do I think are most appropriate for judging the artwork?
- Judgment: Based on the criteria and evidence, what is my judgment about the quality of the artwork?