You have taken the first step toward success in the class. In the next three chapters, you will build on this success, learning how to participate effectively in an art history class, producing well-written and well-argued papers, studying for exams, and conducting research effectively and painlessly.

3

Putting Words to Images

Mastering the Response Essay

Students have often asked me how they could possibly spend more than a paragraph on describing of a work of art. This chapter will take you through the process, helping to you translate your visual observations into a well-written and well-organized response paper.

So, you have been asked to write your first paper for art history class. This is often referred to as a **description** or **response essay,** and it is a standard component of introductory art history courses. The assignment requires you to view a work of art and write your response to it. At first, you might think, nothing could be easier. Finally, a paper requiring no research, no footnotes, and no trips to the library! But the more you think about it, and the nearer the deadline approaches, the more anxious you get. Respond how? How am I going to come up with more than a paragraph by simply *looking* at a work of art? You glance at a poster in your dorm room and give it a try. All you can come up with are a few phrases: a garden with flowers . . . a group of people playing musical instruments . . . a table with a basket of fruit on it. Panic is setting in. What more can I say? And why is it so important, anyway?

As you will see in this chapter, one can say a lot more. Further, you'll find that learning to write about what you see is one of the most important skills you can acquire. As with all writing assignments, the response essay will certainly improve your writing. Trying to communicate an idea, and particularly a complicated one, is an exercise, and—as with physical exercise—it builds muscles—in this case, your "muscles" of articulation. For myself, I have often noticed that after a period of intense writing, the right words surface more quickly, and I am better able to convey what I mean both on paper and in conversation. But the description essay also has another benefit: it improves your powers of *seeing*. Once you starting writing about what you see, you will become more aware of the visual information surrounding you, and you will process that information in an active and critical way. And at a time in which we are constantly bombarded with images meant to inform, to persuade, to arouse, and sometimes to manipulate, what could be more important?

How can a simple writing assignment accomplish all this? By asking you to do something which might seem, at first, paradoxical. After all, looking at a work of art is a nonverbal, immediate experience. You view an image and take it in all at once. Writing about the image, however, means translating the act of looking into a series of written observations—that is, turning a silent, visual sensation into a verbal, sequential composition. That is the challenge: how do you go from looking to writing, while conveying a sensitive, accurate idea of the work of art? This will depend on (1) how closely and critically you observe the work of art in the first place and (2) how clearly you can communicate what you have seen to your reader.

This chapter is intended to help you with these particular tasks. It is not meant, however, as a comprehensive guide to art history writing assignments. For that purpose, there are two very good books to consider. The first is Sylvan Barnet's classic, *A Short Guide to Writing about Art,* 7th ed. (New York: Longmans, 2002), which is a complete guide to art history papers. The second is a more recent publication, Henry Sayre's *Writing About Art,* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998). Both books are extremely useful, but for the present purposes, both far exceed what you need to know in order to write the response essay. By contrast, this chapter will deal only with that particular task, taking you from your initial encounter with a work of art to the finished composition.

First, the basics. What is the response essay exactly? While it might vary slightly depending on your course and professor, we can still draw up a general definition. First, it is most often short, no more than five pages in length, and usually just two or three. Second, it focuses on a single

work of art. Unless otherwise instructed, you do not need to engage in lengthy comparisons with other works. Third, no research is necessary for this paper; do not concern yourself, for example, with a biography of the artist, or with a detailed discussion of the subject matter. Instead, focus simply on what you see.

Where do you find an appropriate work of art? This also varies from class to class. For example, if you attend a school within close proximity to museums, you will most likely be asked to visit an original work of art. In other locations, you may need to work from a photograph. On behalf of art history professors everywhere, however, I urge you to use an original if at all possible. In most cases, a reproduction can only provide you with a limited idea of the sense of a work of art. Details, textures, and scale, among other properties, will be difficult to apprehend when using a copy. In the case of three-dimensional works such as sculpture and architecture, the limits of photography become even greater, because you will only be able to see one view. For example, a building can be experienced from innumerable vantage points, and from both the interior and the exterior. However, do not despair: you can still write a good description paper—you will just have to be sensitive to the aspects of the work that might be missing in a reproduction or photograph.

WORKING IN THE "WHITE BOX": THE MUSEUM AND GALLERY EXPERIENCE

If you are going to be working with an original work of art, your professor will probably specify a museum or gallery to be visited. You will, of course, need to bring tools for writing with you. Keep in mind however, that museums often have special rules about what can and can't be brought into their spaces. If you are planning to bring a laptop computer, for example, call ahead to make sure that is permissible. If using more old-fashioned tools, you might want to bring a pencil, rather than a pen—some museums and libraries will prefer you work with the latter. Also, the pad of paper you use should be small, so that you can take notes comfortably standing up. The same holds true for a laptop. Physical comfort is important: you want to be able to spend at least thirty minutes concentrating on the *work*—not on how much your feet are bothering you. On the same subject, here is another important tip: make sure that you eat ahead of time, because most museums will not allow you to enter with food or drink. This might seem like rather silly advice to include in a book, but as you are probably aware, there is nothing worse than trying to work when you are hungry (particularly if you choose to work on a still life of fruit!). Your

concentration will be ruined, you will want to rush through the experience, and ultimately your paper will suffer if you do not attend to these small matters ahead of time.

It is also important to tour the museum by yourself. I find that many of my students like to go with classmates, often organizing and sharing rides. This is fine, of course, as long as you part ways when you enter the museum. If possible, choose different objects to view; if not, at least make sure that you *do not share ideas,* as tempting as it might be. The professor has assigned the paper in order to hear *your* individual response, not a group consensus. Moreover, he will certainly notice if your papers sound alike.

SELECTING A WORK OF ART

Solitary, and armed with your writing implements, you are ready to face a work of art. But which one should you work on? The answer varies from class to class. Some professors might actually assign you a work, or give you a list of objects to choose from. Others might give you free rein to choose something that falls within the parameters of the class. Make sure you understand what this means. For example, if you are taking a course in ancient and medieval art, do not choose a post-Impressionist painting for your response essay (students do this more frequently than you would think). Check the accompanying captions for relevant information about the date, period, and place of origin of a work of art. If you are still in doubt about your selection, ask your professor before beginning—you might save yourself a lot of wasted time.

Let's say you have been given the freedom to choose, and that you are aware of the kinds of works appropriate for your course. This is when you should consult your own instincts. As you walk into the exhibit space, don't try to be methodical. Let your eye scan the room, approaching objects that you are particularly drawn to. Allow your stream of consciousness to run free. What thoughts and feelings are stimulated by each work? Which intrigues you the most? It might not be the most aesthetically pleasing work of art in the room. My students often choose Egyptian sculpture. When asked why, they tell me that they are attracted to its sense of mystery and strangeness. Perhaps the work you have chosen evokes feelings of awe, fear, or sadness. Perhaps it raises certain ideas in your head, such as thoughts of motherhood, romantic love, or the supernatural world. Don't censor yourself—it doesn't really matter what sorts of thoughts or feelings the work elicits; the most important point here is that it engages you intellectually or emotionally.

Note that I said "engages you." Have you ever watched the behavior of crowds at a blockbuster museum exhibit? They plod sleepily along, sometimes harnessed with headphones, on a forced march from one famous work to another. It is a sad fact that those untrained in art history often do not really engage with images at all; instead, they get lost in a haze of passive, fuzzy appreciation. They stand in front of Monet's *Water Lilies* or Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* as if to catch magical rays of genius beamed from the canvases. In art history class, you will be shaken from that state of stupefied reverence and learn to *really look* at the images before you. You will become an active viewer. As Henry Sayre has written, think of art as "an address, an address that demands a response."[1] The following section will show you how.

RECORDING YOUR IMPRESSIONS

Having selected your work, it is time to take some notes. Begin by recording your initial impressions while they are still fresh in your mind. A sentence or two will do. Here are two examples:

> The painting makes me feel peaceful—it seems so serene. It looks like two big glowing clouds, and I want to walk right into it.

> The sculpture is so joyful—the way the woman holds the baby so close, and the way he looks up into her eyes. It makes me think about the bond between mother and child.

Note how in each case, the student concentrated on what feelings or ideas the work elicited. Try to be as honest, vivid, and original in writing down your thoughts. Avoid trite phrases or overt statements of judgment such as "the women in the picture are so pretty" or the "baby is adorable." Do not write that a work is "beautiful" or "glorious." Even if you find it so, you need to delve deeper into your own reactions and come up with more specific terms: is it serene? graceful? luminous? cheerful?

Next, write down the work's "vital statistics": its title, artist (if known), and date, which should be indicated on a caption adjacent to the work. If mentioned in the caption, you might also want to note down its place of origin (particularly with a premodern work). A word, by the way, on captions: theories about what to include in them vary greatly from

[1]Henry Sayre, *Writing About Art,* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

museum to museum. Some are terse, providing only the vital statistics of a work, while others are much more elaborate, including a wealth of additional information about the object. This information might be so interesting that you may wish to include it in your paper. Note it, certainly. However, the purpose of the response essay is for you to focus on the *visual* rather than the *historical* facts of a work of art, and this should be reflected in your final essay. And by no means should you include the text of the caption *verbatim* in your paper! Not only is this plagiarism, but take it from me—your professor will immediately know where you got the information! For further information on how to cite sources, see Chapter Five.

Having recorded the vital statistics of the work and your initial impressions of it, it is time to begin noting your visual observations, a process often called "prewriting." As the name suggests, this is meant to be a preliminary stage to writing the paper. Don't worry about elegant language or even complete sentences. Don't worry about finding some poetic metaphor for the work in front of you. Just focus on being as thorough, clear, and precise as possible. Why? Because these notes will provide you with "research material"—the notes from which you will compose your paper. To help you with this process, each paragraph below includes a series of questions for you to answer as you look at the work.

1. Medium and materials. Many students make the mistake of examining a work from an inch away before they have understood it as a whole. *It is crucial, however, that you start with the most elemental of observations.* What is the **medium** of the work? It might be one of the basic three, that is, painting, sculpture, or architecture. You might, however, have chosen a work of mixed media (such as collage), or more recent media, such as photography or digital art. Second, what kinds of materials are used? Is it oil on canvas? Is it made of basalt or polychrome wood? Is it a building made of reinforced concrete? Noting down the materials is not just information for information's sake. If we return to the idea of art as an address, we need to think of all aspects of the work as *words,* chosen deliberately by the artist in order to convey his or her message. In some cases, the message is more overt than in others. For instance, if we look at Renoir's *Bathers* (fig.12) we can see how the use of oil paint, a soft, "juicy" substance, works well with the subject matter of the scene: three young nude women cavorting by a riverbank. If the same image were executed in pen and ink, much of that sense would be lost. Then consider an ancient Egyptian sculpture, the *Khafre* (fig. 14), made of diorite, a hard, enduring stone. Think about how the materials themselves encouraged the creation of a simple geometric form, and how that form communicates a message of permanence and timelessness. Important note: whether or not you know for sure how hard or soft a material might be, its appearance alone should give you a sense

Figure 14 *Khafre,* from Giza. Dynasty 4, c. 2570–2544 B.C. *Source:* Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

of its nature. Remember, the paper is about your *perception* of the work. Now, turn to your work and answer the following questions:

1. What is the medium used?
2. What are the materials?
3. Do these elements shape the work's effect on you? How?
4. How would it feel if you touched the work? Would it be hard or soft? Prickly? Smooth?
5. Do you get a sense of different textures, such as cloth, skin, and hair?

2. Dimensions. Next, consider the dimensions of the work. In many cases, this information will often be listed on the museum caption, but if it isn't, don't worry. Estimate the measurements. Think about how the object appears in relation to you as the viewer. Then think about the subject matter. Is it a larger than lifesize human figure? Is it a medieval manuscript page of tiny proportions? Is it a gigantic **abstract** (*nonrepresentational*) sculpture? Think about how the size of the work affects the way you perceive it. Then answer the following questions:

1. What are the dimensions of the work?
2. What is the physical relationship between you and the work? Are you overwhelmed by it? Do you tower over it?
3. Does proportion play a role in the effect of the work on you? How?

3. Display of the Object. Now, consider how the object is displayed. Get as close to it as possible, remembering, however, that most museums have security devices that will be activated if you get too close. If you have chosen a sculpture, try to look at it from as many viewpoints as its placement will permit. Then walk away from it and view it at a distance. View it at different angles, and, if possible, in different lights. Think about how it was intended to be viewed. Does it have the most effect when you are near, at medium distance, or far away? Was it meant to be viewed frontally, or from the side? What kind of lighting is best suited to it? Pretend you are a museum curator, in charge of creating an effective display for the work of art.

If you are working with architecture, start by viewing the structure from the exterior. Does it have a clear focal point on one particular side? Does the exterior seem to invite you into the building? Then, if possible, enter the building. Is the structure best understood from the interior or the exterior? Note your observations. Here are some examples of such note-taking.

> This painting looks best when seen at medium distance. When I get too close, the brushstrokes are so bumpy that I can't see the whole thing clearly. From too far away, however, I can't see the details.

> This sculpture is big and simple in shape. But the shape changes in interesting ways as I walk around it. I think that its placement in the middle of the room is just right.

> This piece seems to make the most sense from straight ahead. The figure has erect, squared shoulders, and he is looking straight out—I feel like I should be right in front of him.

> This building is best understood from the outside—I can understand where the tower is in relation to the surrounding sides of the structure. When I went inside, the wall decoration and the windows disoriented me. But outside, the organization of its different parts was made perfectly clear.

Have you ever noticed how some works of art seem to invite you to look at and react to them, whereas others seem to be more remote, existing in their own sealed world? Whichever type you have chosen (and many works lie somewhere in the middle), make sure to note if and how the work engages you. What attracted you toward it?

It is also important to be aware of the *original context* of a work of art; that is, the setting for which it was intended. When we look at works of art in museums, we are often dealing with objects that were once destined for other locations. A medieval altarpiece was intended for a church setting, while Egyptian sculptures were often housed in tomb chambers. Even a painting from the Impressionist era was initially placed in a gallery very much unlike the one that now houses it. A response essay may not require you to do any detective work in the area of original context, but keeping original context in mind will help you think about how you, the viewer, are intended to behold the image. Now, look at the work again and answer the following questions:

1. How is your object displayed?
2. From what angle should it be viewed? Why?
3. From what distance should it be viewed? Why?
4. How is it lit, and how does that affect your experience?
5. What is the original context of the work of art?

Formal Elements

It is now time for you to analyze the *formal* (or visual) aspects of your work of art, using the language of art history. Many terms of formal analysis are used in everyday speech, such as *line* and *color.* However, these words have specific and technical meanings when used in art history, and an important part of your success in the class is your mastery of them. The following sections are designed not only to explain the terms but also to show you how to use them in your paper.

Line. One of the most basic art-historical concepts is line, and it manifests itself in many different ways depending on the work of art. In sculpture and

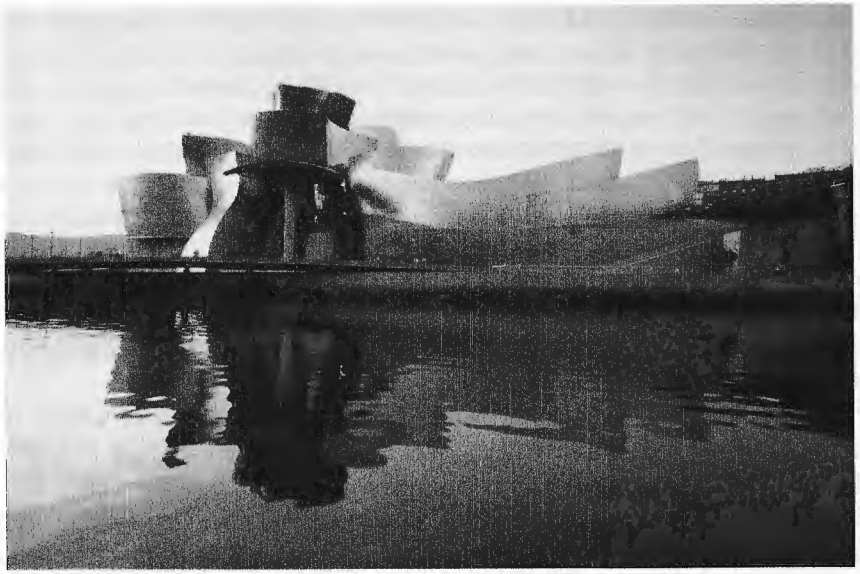

Figure 15 Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Museum of Contemporary Art, in Bilbao, Spain, 1997. *Source:* © FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, 2002. Photographer: Erika Ede. All rights reserved. Partial or total reproduction prohibited.

architecture, we often speak of the **contour line:** the outline defining the perimeter of the shape. Think of the triangular contour lines of Egyptian pyramids, or the wavy, undulating contours of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum of Contemporary Art in Bilbao, Spain (fig. 15). Or consider the contour lines of the prehistoric figurine known as the *Woman from Willendorf,* made of repeating semicircles (fig. 16). Contour lines also occur in two-dimensional works. Think about the lines that surround the forms, for example, in a painting such as Masaccio's *Trinity with the Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist, and Donors* (fig. 17). In modern abstract painting, lines work in a different way. For instance, Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930) (fig. 18) consists of strong vertical and horizontal lines creating a geometric design that denys any sense of depth.

Lines are powerful not only because they define shapes and order images, but because they also serve to direct your eyes, whether in architecture, sculpture, or painting. Remember the way line works in the *Nike of Samothrace* (fig. 8). The upraised wings of the figure and the folds of the drapery create two intersecting diagonal lines across the body of the figure. Now consider a sixteenth-century Flemish painting, the *Return of the Hunters* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (fig. 19). On this two-dimensional

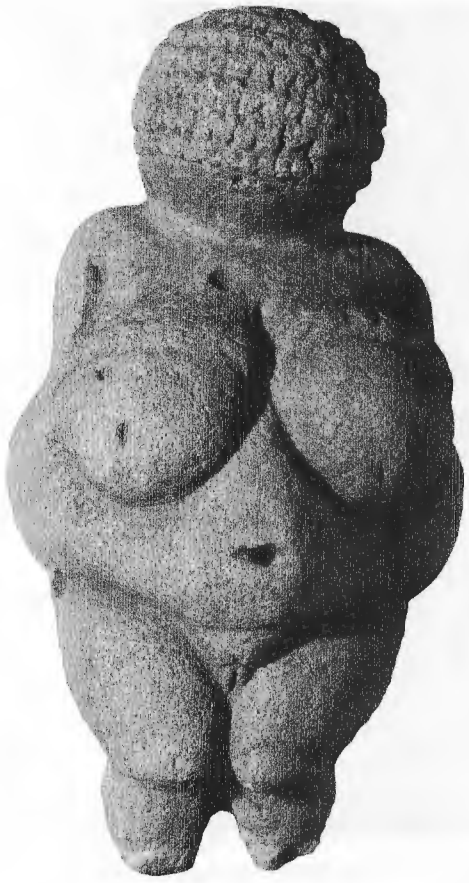

Figure 16 *Woman from Willendorf,* Austria, c. 22000–21000 B.C. *Source:* Erich Lessing/ Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria/Art Resource.

surface, how are lines used? As Marilyn Stokstad has commented,

> The sharp diagonals, both on the picture plane and as lines receding into space, are countered by the pointed gables and roofs at the lower right as well as by the jagged mountain peaks linking the valley and the skyline along the right edge. Their rhythms are deliberately slowed and stabilized by a balance of vertical tree trunks and horizontal rectangles of water frozen-over in the distance.[2]

Note how strongly line works in this image to direct your eye, affecting the whole composition and your experience of the work.

In most cases, the use of repeating lines at right angles conveys a sense of stability. Strong diagonals, on the other hand, often create tension

[2]*Art History,* 727.

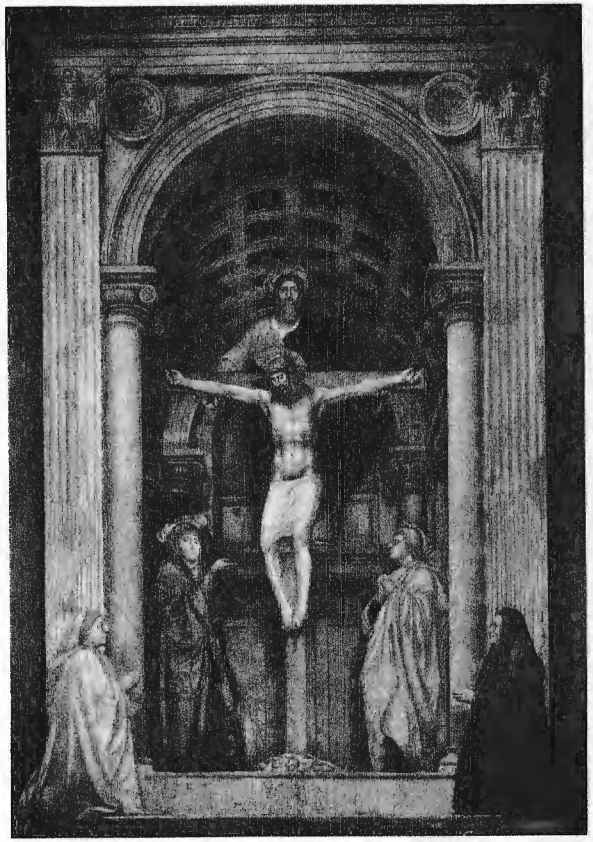

Figure 17 Masaccio, Italian (1401–1428), *Trinity with the Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist, and Donors.* Fresco in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, c. 1425 (?). *Source:* Alinari/Art Resource.

and suggest motion. Consider another example: Jean-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784–1785) (fig. 4), a painting depicting three Roman brothers (the Horatii) swearing an oath to their father to fight to the death for Rome. Note how the raised arms of the three brothers at left create an emphatic diagonal line that is countered by the upraised gesture of their red-cloaked father. But the effect is not of uncontrolled energy. David is known for his careful, balanced **compositions;** note how the diagonal lines in the image are stabilized by the triple-arched backdrop of the image.

Let's turn to architecture. Think about a Greek temple, such as the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, dated to the sixth century B.C.

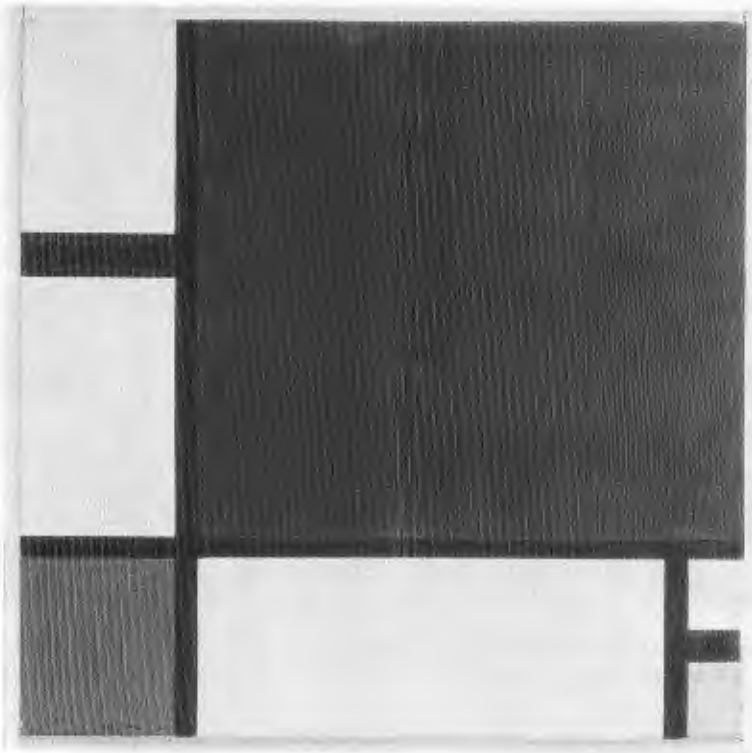

Figure 18 Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow,* 1930. 51 × 51 cm. (Private Collection). *Source:* Giraudon/Art Resource, NY/© 2004 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o Beeldrecht/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

(fig. 20). What are its predominant lines? A series of uniform verticals (the columns) complemented by a continuous horizontal (the **entablature**). How does this arrangement of lines differ from, for example, the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao? In the building by Frank Gehry, the building contains, it seems, almost no right angles, using instead curvy, wavy forms. How does the difference in line affect your experience of the two buildings? The former, with its uprights and horizontals, seems stable and planted in the ground, while the modern building seems to move, to undulate.

In two-dimensional arts, as mentioned, line is also used primarily to describe or outline shapes. But the illusion of **volume** (or roundness) can be also indicated through the use of lines, as in the use of **hatching** (short, sharp strokes that create shadows). Moreover, lines can be uniform and

Figure 19 Peter Bruegel the Elder, Flemish (c. 1525–1569), *Return of the Hunters.* 1565. Oil and tempera on panel, 46 × 63 3/4 in. *Source:* Kunsthistorisches, Museum, Vienna.

Figure 20 Kallikrates and Iktinos, Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, 447–438 B.C. *Source:* Photographer: Paul W. Liebbardt.

Figure 21 *Page Depicting Mark the Evangelist, Ebbo Gospels,* c. 816–840. *Source:* Bibliotheque Municipale, Epernay, France. Art Resource, NY.

sharp, as in the example of Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930) (fig. 18), or fuzzier and of inconsistent thickness, as in Monet's *Water Lilies, Giverny* (fig. 1).

If you think that the choice of lines does not affect your experience of a work of art, consider a page from the medieval manuscript known as the *Ebbo Gospels* (816–840) (fig. 21). It depicts the *evangelist* Mark seated in a landscape. Line, more than any other formal component, dominates the image. Instead of using shading or modeling to define drapery folds, the artist has depicted a figure bathed in swirling, undulating lines. The saint's hair is a mass of wildly curving strokes, and even the landscape is composed short, curved hatchmarks. The use of these marks serves to energize the image—it has often been referred to as having a "nervous linearity."

This nervousness and dynamism, moreover, is a perfect visual counterpart to the subject matter of the painting: the saint is depicted just as he is divinely inspired to write down the word of God. Think about the work of art you have selected and ask yourself these questions:

1. What are the dominant lines of the work?
2. If sculpture or architecture, what kinds of contour lines are created?
3. Do the lines suggest movement and direction? Or do the forms seem planted in the ground?
4. To where do the lines lead your eye?
5. If you are dealing with a two-dimensional work, are the lines thick or thin?
6. Is their width consistent?
7. Are they straight or wavy?
8. Are they predominantly vertical, horizontal, or diagonal?
9. How does line contribute to the overall effect of the work?

Shape and Space. As you answer the previous question, you will also find yourself confronting a related issue: **shape** and **space.** What do we mean by shape? Based on its common English definition, you probably already have a good idea. But it can also be defined, for our purposes, in a more technical way: for three-dimensional works such as sculpture and architecture, *shape* is defined by the *physical contours of the form.* In the case of the pyramids at Giza, for example, we are speaking of an object that takes up space and thus has *volume.* In the case of two-dimensional works, shape is defined by lines, or sometimes edges of color. It exists on a flat plane (such as a canvas or photographic sheet) only in width and height. In abstract art, as in a work by Mondrian or Jackson Pollock, the quality of flatness is often emphasized: we are to understand shapes as surface elements. However, artists will often manipulate shape in order to convey a sense of three dimensions. In painting, one of the most frequent ways to suggest this is by the use of tonal gradations or **modeling,** in which shadows and highlights simulate the effects of light bouncing off an uneven, projecting object. Shapes, moreover, can be classified as either *geometric,* as in the case of the Giza pyramids, or **biomorphic,** which refers to natural forms, such as human figures, animals, and plants.

1. What shapes are used in your work?
2. If it is a two-dimensional work, has the artist suggested a three-dimensional shape?
3. How is this done?
4. If sculpture or architecture, what form does the shape take?

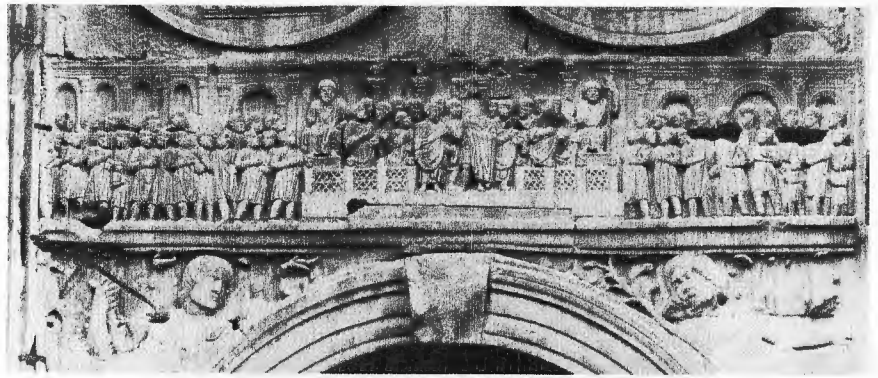

Figure 22 *Constantine Speaking to the People,* relief panel from the Arch of Constantine, Rome, 312–315 A.D. *Source:* Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.

Space. So far, we have talked about the definitions of solid shapes. We may refer to these as *positive* shapes. But there are also shapes created by the absence of solids. These can be referred to as **negative shape,** or *space:* the void located between or around solid shapes. In sculpture and architecture these spaces are real. In two-dimensional art, however, space, like shape, is only implied. Now at this moment you may wonder, "Why all the fuss about something as insubstantial as space?" As with line, however, space can have a powerful effect on a work of art and your experience of it. For example, it can create dramatic optical effects in sculpture. Consider the fourth-century reliefs on the *Arch of Constantine* (fig. 22). Here, short, stubby figures stand in a row across a long horizontal plane. Between each of the figures' legs are shadows, roughly the same width as the legs themselves. Hence a uniform pattern of light (made by the figures' legs) and dark (made by the spaces between them) is created, and thus a kind of visual rhythm is established.

Space can also be used in more metaphorical, expressive ways. This is illustrated in a work of classical Greek art: Consider the *Woman and Maid,* a painting on a *lekythos,* a slender, one handled vase, dated to 450–440 B.C. (fig. 23). The vase depicts a servant offering a box of jewelry to her mistress, the deceased. Although in close proximity, the two figures do not look at each other. There is a clearly perceptible, roughly triangular void that separates them, painted white like the rest of the background. In its sharp outlines, and placement *between* the two figures, this space emphasizes the sense of loss inherent in the theme of the work.

Because the vase contains only minimal indications as to the setting of the two figures, it is impossible to discern whether the void that separates them is shallow or deep. Yet in many two-dimensional works,

Figure 23 Style of Achilles Painter, *Woman and Maid,* white-ground and black-figure decoration on a *lekythos,* c. 450–440 B.C. *Source:* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

one may often discern different layers of **pictorial depth,** a term referring to the recession of space into the distance. If we look at a landscape, for example, we can immediately sense which elements of the painting are closest to us and which are farther away. Yet, we are, of course, looking at a flat surface. The space that seems closest to us is referred to as the *foreground,* that which seems farthest is referred to as the *background,* and that which is between them is called the *middle ground.* Artists will manipulate these elements in order to control the way you experience an image. For example, note how in the *Oath of the Horatii* (fig. 4), David has positioned the action in the foreground. An arcade situated immediately behind blocks any further recession into space and creates a shallow, stage-set effect, highlighting the dramatic content of scene.

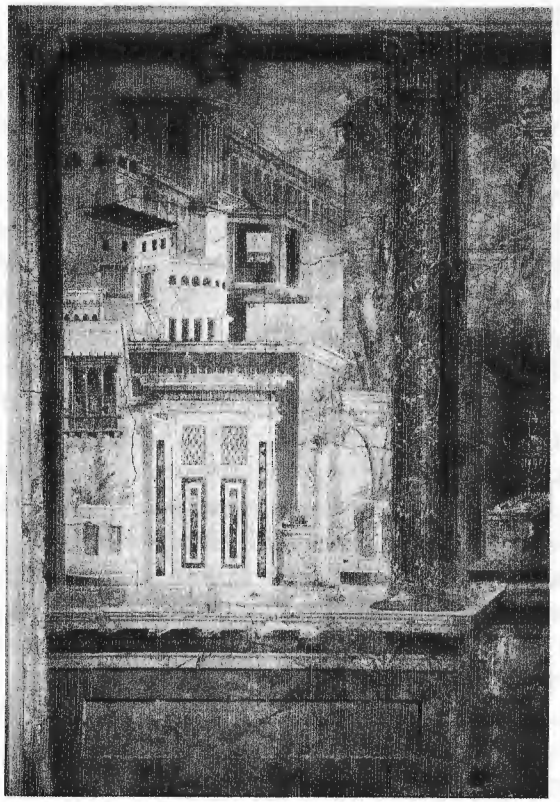

Figure 24 *Cityscape,* detail of a wall painting from House of Publius Fannius Synistor, Boscoreale, late 1st century A.D. Wall painting from the Cubiculum of the Villa at Boscoreale: Panel II. Fresco. All Rights Reserved. *Source:* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1903. (03.14.13a-g).

How is depth created in a two-dimensional image? There is no single answer to this question. Artists from different eras and cultures have conveyed the idea using a variety of methods. To demonstrate this, let's compare the following two works: the ancient Roman wall painting entitled *Cityscape* (fig. 24) and the *Trinity* by Masaccio from fifteenth-century Italy. Both are meant to give the impression of pictorial depth or **perspective,** but do so in different ways.

Let's start by looking at Masaccio's *Trinity* (fig. 17). Let your eyes follow the diagonal lines created by the figures and by the architecture. Note that the barrel vault above the figural group contains a series of diagonal lines. In your mind, extend them back into the depths of the

image. You have probably noticed that all these lines, called **orthogonals,** intersect at a single point, referred to as a **vanishing point,** just above the base of the cross. This method of conveying depth, referred to as *scientific perspective,* was invented during the Renaissance and is characteristic of the postmedieval art of Western Europe.

Turn now to the *Cityscape,* a detail of a wall painting from the House of Publius Fannius Synistor, Boscoreale, and dated to the late first century A.D. Here too, allow your eyes to follow the orthogonals, and extend them toward an imagined vanishing point. You will immediately notice that not all the diagonals lead to the same point—rather, each leads in different directions. This system, frequent in ancient and medieval art of the West, is referred to as *intuitive perspective,* because it is based on the intuition or sensation of depth rather than on a scientific system.

Most people new to the study of art history make the mistake of assuming that scientific perspective is somehow superior. However, such qualitative judgments are rarely useful. Even if we agree (and we might not) that scientific perspective replicates most closely the way things seem in nature, this doesn't necessarily mean that the method is superior to any other. *What makes close imitation of the natural world superior to a more abstract or subjective expression?*

There are many additional ways to show depth. For example, on a two-dimensional plane, depth can be conveyed by placing the nearest figures lowest on the page and those farthest at the very top. Space is thus created by the stacking up of forms. This is referred to as *vertical perspective,* and is commonly found in pre-Renaissance and non-Western art. Another way to indicate spatial distances is to use *overlapping,* in which one form is placed in front of another. **Diminution,** in which the farther object is made smaller, is also a frequent means to convey depth. Finally, elements of line, light, and color might also be brought to use, as in the case of *atmospheric perspective.* This method is based on the observation that the closer an object is to the viewer, the sharper its outlines and more intense its color. Objects placed farther away lose their strong contours and hues, becoming faded and blurry.

Now consider the use of space and shape in your work and answer the following questions:

1. If you are working with a two-dimensional work, what are the shapes present?
2. How are mass and volume conveyed?
3. How is negative space conveyed?
4. Has the author used these forms to further his message (as we saw in the *lekythos*?)

5. Is the work open or does it seem more solid?
6. Is spatial recession conveyed and if so, how?
7. How does the artist's treatment of shape and space inform your experience of the work?
8. If you are dealing with architecture or sculpture, what are the dominant forms?
9. Are they biomorphic or geometric?
10. Is there any empty space, and how does that affect your experience?
11. Does the empty space make the object look more fragile or is does it seem strong and sturdy?

Composition and Relative Scale. We have considered the concept of shape and space in your work of art. But in order to understand your work, you must consider how these elements come together as a whole. The organization and arrangement of forms is referred to as *composition,* and this greatly affects the meaning of a work of art, controlling your visual focus and highlighting particular elements of the whole.

To discern the composition of a work, it is important to be able to see underlying formal structures. In the case of abstract art, the process is easier: you should be able to pick out the dominant forms and the way they are organized. A representational work, however, is more challenging to work with. For example, instead of seeing the figure of a woman, you must try to see her as a collection of cylinders, spheres, triangles, or whatever shapes she is composed of. How best to achieve this? The trick I learned in high school drawing class is particularly effective: turn the work upside down or sideways—your mind will be less ready to pick out identifiable shapes and think "arm" and "leg," and will focus instead on the pure formal properties. Of course, this trick is not advisable if you are working with a museum object! However, try squinting or turning your head—you will be less likely to be distracted by the subject matter. At this point, the composition will become clear to you.

Why is composition an important concept? Like the other formal elements we have considered, the way forms are arranged in a work often creates the overall message. To understand how this works, look at the medieval tympanum at Chartres Cathedral (fig. 9). Now, turn the book upside down. Forget that you are viewing Christ surrounded by evangelist symbols, apostles, and prophets. Think about these figures as abstract forms instead. How are they organized? You will notice that the composition is made up of one large figure at the center of the composition. Moving out from the center are slightly smaller figures. Turning to the **archivolts,** or the arched frames of the portal, the figures have become even smaller.

With these observations about composition, we can now "remember" who we are looking at. Notice how the central form, that of Christ, dominates the composition. Not only is he placed at the center of the image, but he is also the largest figure on the tympanum, and is framed by the other figures. These compositional choices organize the image, but they also serve another function: they illustrate a hierarchy in which Christ assumes the most important position. Indicating importance by manipulating the **scale** of figures and using a centralized composition with framing elements is typical of many premodern and non-Western artistic traditions.

Now think about how forms are arranged in painting. Let's turn back to Masaccio's *Trinity* (fig. 17). Again, put side the identity of the figures and concentrate on the composition they create. Notice how the two central figures create a solid, stable anchor for the composition, which is framed symmetrically by the two kneeling figures nearest to them. This framing element is furthered by the two donors at either sides of the composition. The symmetry and solidity of the composition, moreover, is emphasized by the massive barrel vault that houses the figures and by the stone base which supports them. Note, then, how the placement of figures symmetrically around a central component and the use of horizontals and verticals (instead of diagonals) conveys a sense of solidity and stability.

Now consider a Baroque painting: the central panel of *The Raising of the Cross* by Peter Paul Rubens (1609–1610) (fig. 25). As with Masaccio's painting, the image depicts a group of figures surrounding Christ on the cross. However, here we see the moment just before the Crucifixion, when the cross is hoisted to an upright position by a group of muscular soldiers. The figure of Christ creates a strong diagonal from the lower right to the upper left, which is highlighted also by the pale nude colors of his flesh and of those immediately around him. Unlike the composition of Masaccio's *Trinity,* with its anchored, centralized composition, here we have a sense of imbalance and tension—as though the central unit of figures would topple at any moment. This sense of tension is in keeping with the themes of the work: intense emotion and physical suffering. Now, think about the composition of the work you have chosen to describe, how it affects your experience, and how it relates to the subject matter depicted.

1. How do the various formal elements interact?
2. Does the relationship convey the unity of the forms? How?
3. Are all the forms clustered toward the center, or are they balanced at either sides?
4. Is the composition symmetrical?

Figure 25 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Raising of the Cross,* c. 1609–1610. *Source:* Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp/SuperStock.

5. How is emphasis achieved through form?
6. What is the focal point of the composition?
7. How is this focal point created?
8. What is the theme or idea conveyed by the focal point?

Light and Color. So far we have talked about the solids and spaces that define the work you are describing. These, as you have already noted, affect the way you perceive the painting and the message it communicates to you. But the shapes and spaces that you see may also be informed by two more principles: *light* and *color.*

Let's begin with light. This element affects both two- and three-dimensional works, but it is most affecting when it appears in two-dimensional work such as painting. Often, light is used to convey the volumes of solids. For example, in Renoir's *Bathers* (fig. 12), we can see how highlights, in combination with shadows, give a sense of roundness to the objects.

This, however, is a rather broad generalization. In fact, artists of different eras used light in various ways. In the Venetian Renaissance, artists

suffused their paintings with clear, golden, evenly distributed light, whereas the Florentine artist Leonardo used more heightened contrasts between light and dark—a technique referred to by the Italian term **chiaroscuro,** which translates, literally, as "light-dark."

In some works, light creates more dramatic power than any other element. Consider, for example, Georges de la Tour's *Repentant Magdalen* (c. 1640) (fig. 26). Here, the seated Mary Magdalen sits at a desk, resting her head in one hand and touching a skull with the other. Behind the skull is a lit candle, which casts strong light on her profile and arm. The rest of the room is thrown into darkness. This creates a theatrical effect, effectively spotlighting the woman as the subject of the painting. But light also

Figure 26 Georges de La Tour (1593–1652), *Repentant Magdalen,* c. 1640. "Madeleine a la Veilleuse" (Penitent Magdalen). Oil on canvas, 128 × 94 cm. *Source:* Louvre, Paris, France. Copyright Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

plays an important role in the meaning of the work as well. Not only are we directed, through the use of light, toward the woman, but we meditate on her, on the ephemerality of the candle, on the skull before her, and on the void lying outside of that small, lighted space. Think of how different the piece would be if the whole room were "lit up" by the artist!

1. What role does light play in the work you have selected?
2. Is it uniform and gentle? Or dramatic and theatrical?
3. Where does it lead your eye?
4. Is it disturbing or comforting? Why?
5. Does it help to convey the message or theme of the work? How?

Color, also called *hue,* can also play an important role in a work of art. To understand the effects of color in the work you are responding to, you need first to master some technical knowledge on the subject: there are three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue. By mixing them in various combinations, you arrive at the secondary colors: green, yellow, and purple. Moreover, each of these colors can vary according to its *value* (degree of lightness or darkness), and *intensity* (degree of saturation). To visualize this, think of the difference between the color of an emerald and a stalk of celery.

Often, the choice of colors, or *palette,* of a work of art sets a particular mood. Reds, yellows, and oranges are often referred to as warm or hot colors, whereas blues, greens, and purples are cool. In his painting *Water Lilies, Giverny* (fig. 1), Monet used a wide range of blues and greens, emphasizing the serenity and stillness of the watery gardens. In Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig. 13), however, the artist has reduced his palette to a sharp contrast of acid orange and light blue, lending the scene a mood of aggression, if not violence.

While some artists use color to convey the accurate hue of an object, artists from the Impressionists onwards begin to experiment and depart from the *local* (or authentic) *colors* of an object. Monet placed blues and reds in fields of hay to simulate the optical effects of looking out into the distance in bright sun. Picasso, on the other hand, used green in the hair of his mistress. Now, think about the palette used in the work you are examining:

1. What is the dominant palette of your work? Warm or cool colors?
2. What is their value?
3. What is their intensity?
4. Is color used to help convey the work's theme or message?
5. Does it add drama or tension, or is it calming?

Style. **Style** is the final component for you to consider as you take notes on your chosen work of art. What do we mean by style? Don't confuse it with the popular definition—it has nothing to do with being fashionable. Style is a technical term with specific application in the field of art history, referring to the way in which the artist presents his or her subject to you. Style is a question of *how* the artist achieves his or her presentation. In painting and sculpture, there is a *representational* and *nonrepresentational* style; the former depicts views or objects recognizable in the world, and the other is *abstract*—depicting forms and shapes that originate in the mind of the artist. Style also refers to the way in which forms are presented. Are they defined primarily by line? In this case, you may call the work **linear.** The *Page Depicting Mark the Evangelist* in the *Ebbo Gospels.* c. 816–840 (fig. 21) is a work in which ink is used to define forms. It is an excellent representative of the linear style. However, paintings too can be linear. Consider, for example, the work of Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, a neoclassical painter and student of the famous neoclassical artist Jean-Louis David. In Ingres' painting *Large Odalisque* (1814) (fig. 7), depicting a reclining nude woman, the canvas surface seems smooth and glassy, and distinct lines define the contours of the figure, the pleats of the drapery, and the dark void beyond. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, on the other hand, used a **painterly** style. In his *Bathers* (1887) (fig. 12), the artist used a brush loaded with paint and applied it to the canvas in loose strokes, endowing the forms with soft modeling rather than sharp outlines.

The elements of style presented to you thus far probably seem straightforward. However, students often get confused by four additional concepts: **realism, naturalism, idealism,** and **abstraction.** Let's begin with the first. What is *realism*? Consider the example of a late Roman portrait of the emperor *Caracalla,* dating from the early third century A.D. (fig. 27). Pay attention to the way the face is handled. It is that of an individual; we see the wrinkles and furrows on the forehead, the folds of skin linking the nose to the mouth, the prominent cleft chin, and even the emperor's stubble. All of these details convey the sense of a real person; one can imagine walking by such a figure on the street. So, *realism* is the attempt to depict objects exactly as they are in actual visible reality, "warts and all."

Like realism, *naturalism* is also based on the representation of the physical world; in this case, however, artists look to nature only for inspiration, rather than trying to achieve precise imitation. For an example, let's turn to the Corinthian **capital,** an element of Greek architecture (fig. 28). Consider the plant forms sculpted around its base, referred to

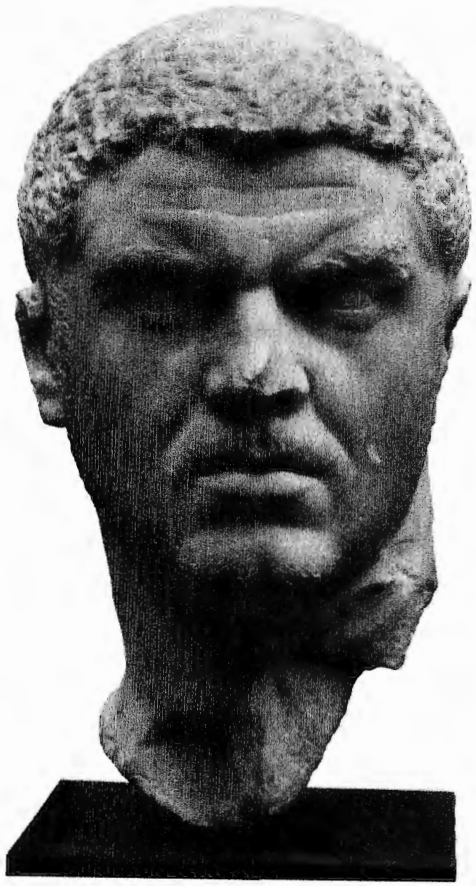

Figure 27 *Caracalla,* early 3rd c. A.D. Portrait head of the Emperor Caracalla (A.D. 211–217). Marble, bust, Roman III Century A.D. *Source:* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Samuel D. Lee Fund, 1940.

as **acanthus** leaves. Note that they seem to bend and curve around the capital, conveying a sense of real, organic life forms. They appear to be growing right out of the capital. Certainly, the forms are somewhat patterned—the artist has arranged them symmetrically to conform to the circular base of the capital. But they are still recognizable as forms found in nature.

Naturalism might also have to do with the way a figure is rendered, as in, for example, Greek sculpture. Let's consider a work of early classical sculpture, the *Doryphoros* (fig. 2), a portrait of a young athlete in the nude. Note how the artist has paid attention to details of the anatomy, such as the little flap of muscle above the knee, seemingly suspended by the skin. Note also the way the figure stands, with his weight shifted onto his left leg. Attention to anatomy and to lifelike movements of the body

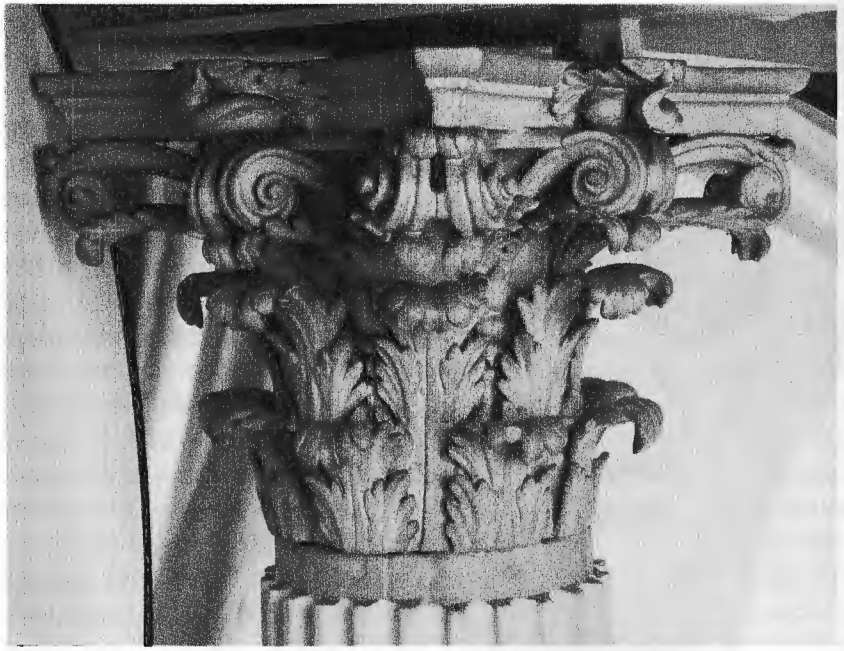

Figure 28 Corinthian capital. Carved leaves. *Source:* Dorling Kindersley Media Library.

are also elements of naturalism. But is this a particular man, someone you might run into in a restaurant or store? It is hard to say. What are his distinguishing features? He has no wrinkles, freckles, or asymmetries—those "irregularities" which distinguish us from each other and make us unique individuals. There is no hint of a facial expression to convey a specific state of mind or mood. This makes the *Doryphoros* an example of naturalism rather than *realism.* It is a work *inspired* by the appearance of an actual young man, but not a precise record of that man. Drapery or clothing can also be termed as *naturalistic* if it hangs over the body in a believable way.

Idealism and abstraction are more conceptual. In the case of *idealism,* the work of art is meant to communicate a kind of visual perfection or beauty. It is important here to remember that beauty is not an absolute idea, but shifts from culture to culture—Victorian ideals of female beauty, for example, are quite different from those of modern Japan. In Greek sculpture, idealism was often conveyed through representations of the human figure such as the *Doryphoros* (fig. 2). Now, you might be confused at this point: didn't I just use this work as an example of naturalism?

Figure 29 *Menkaure and his Wife, Queen Khamerernebty,* from Giza, Dynasty 4, c. 2515 B.C. Slate. *Source:* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Isn't it inspired by nature? The answer is yes and yes. But in Greek society, the youthful athletic human figure, rendered in a naturalistic way, was considered the epitome of what was good and beautiful. Its sculptor, Polykleitos, devised a mathematical formula in order to produce the ideal male form, and the *Doryphoros* was intended as a representation of it. So the *Doryphoros* is an example of both *naturalism* and *idealism.*

In the royal portraiture of ancient Egypt, we also encounter idealism. Here, too, the figures are represented as young and strong, with broad shoulders, a slim waist, and muscular limbs. However, instead of the relaxed stance of the Greek sculpture, the Egyptians preferred to depict their ideal figures as rigid, frontal, and erect, as in the sculpture *Menkaure and his Wife, Queen Khamerernebty* (fig. 29).

Abstraction is another way to describe artistic style. In this case, the artist is less interested in the careful recording of how things look in nature, and more interested in a certain visual property or pattern. Let's take an example from prehistoric art, the *Woman from Willendorf* (fig. 16). We can certainly recognize that this is a heavy-set woman, and we can distinguish the different parts of her body. Yet, we can also note that the representation is not perfectly true-to-life, but has been manipulated. Note the exaggerated solidness and roundness of her breasts, belly, and thighs. The other parts of her body, by contrast, are virtually unrecognizable: the face is entirely obscured, and her minuscule hands are only just visible above the breasts. In this way, the artist transformed the female body into a pattern of repeating round forms. The artist's method of abstraction, moreover, emphasizes a single idea; the round belly, breasts, and thighs convey the fertility of the female—an important message in a era when the average life expectancy of humans was around 35!

In some works, however, there is no recognizable relation to subjects found in nature. Such works are referred to as **nonrepresentational** or **nonobjective** art. Twentieth-century art offers many examples of this style. Consider Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930) (fig. 18). Here, we are confronted with a series of colored squares, large and small, connected by a grid of black lines. The artist has turned away from the naturalistic to concentrate primarily on geometric forms, sharp contrasts of color, and repeating patterns. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the picture is empty of meaning because of the absence of a recognizable subject. In fact, we know that Mondrian viewed his compositions as metaphors for an ideal society, in which the use of colors and balanced forms represented individuals living in harmony. But an exploration of subject matter, after all, is not the aim this chapter. Rather, it is to make you aware of the different styles that an artist can adopt to communicate his or her ideas.

Another artistic style is called **expressionism.** In this case, the work might be naturalistic, abstract, *or* idealistic—expressionism refers to any work that appeals to the emotions of the viewer, often in an exaggerated or theatrical way. Twentieth-century art provides us with many examples of expressionism, and these often also feature elements of abstraction. Perhaps the most famous is Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) (fig. 30). In this case, a man stands in the foreground of a landscape, holding his hands to his head and crying out. The eyes and mouth of the man are enlarged, and lines radiate around the figure, focusing our attention on his disturbed psychological state. Even the landscape, with its wavy horizon lines, seems to reverberate with anxiety. Note how line is used here, as in the *Ebbo Gospels* (fig. 21), to convey drama and mood.

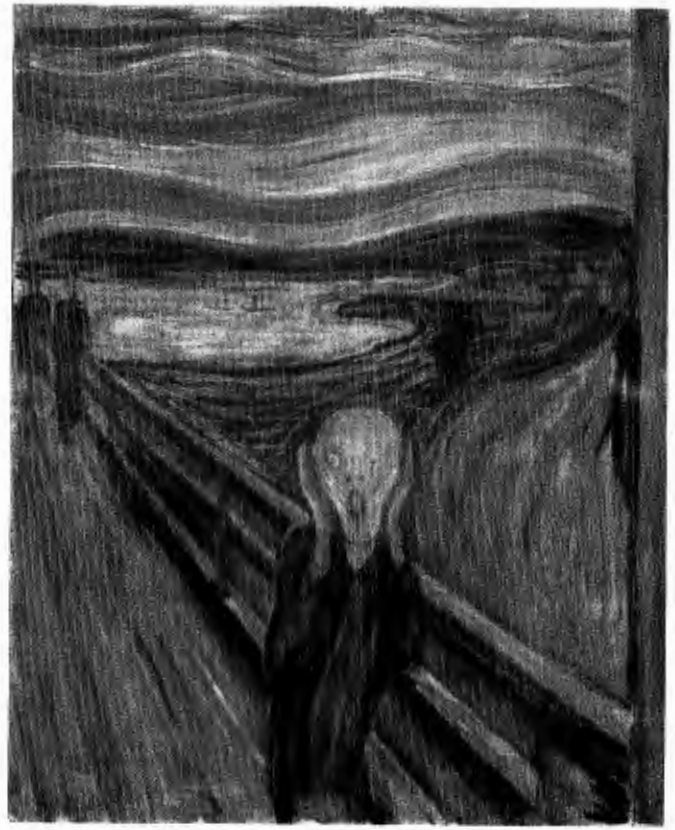

Figure 30 Edvard Munch, *The Scream,* 1893. *Source:* Oslo, National Gallery. Scala/Art Resource, NY. © 2004 The Munch Museum/The Munch–Ellingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Abstract Expressionism is a specific period unto itself, and refers to a school of painting and sculpture active in New York between 1940 and c.1960. In the work of Jackson Pollock, for example, *representational* forms have been abandoned in favor of rhythmic splatters and drips of paint, records of the dynamic and expressive gestures of the artist.

Now consider the work you have chosen to explore and ask yourself the following questions:

1. In what style is your artist working?
2. Do you see elements of abstraction? What are these elements?
3. What do you think the artist meant to convey through his or her abstraction?
4. Is it a naturalistic form? To what extent is it inspired by nature? To what extent does it depart from nature?

5. Is it a realistic form? What makes it realistic? What seems "real" about it?
6. Is it an ideal form? How do you know? What makes it characteristic of ideal beauty? And if so, to what culture does it belong?
7. Is it expressionistic? Does it appeal primarily to your emotions? Which emotions and how?

Before leaving the museum, it is useful to draw a small sketch of the work. This is mostly for your benefit; it doesn't matter if you feel you are a gifted artist or not. The purpose is to get you to look carefully at the work, and sometimes the best way to do this is through recording what you see in visual as well as verbal terms. A sketch will also be a useful resource to return to as you write the paper. If a photographic reproduction of the work is available, however, either from a website, a book, or in the form of a postcard, you should obtain that as well, and if possible, include it with your paper.

WRITING THE PAPER

Having examined the work of art closely, answered the above questions, and drawn a thumbnail sketch, you are ready to begin the process of composing your paper. To do so, find a quiet, comfortable place to write. This might be your dorm room, the library, or even a café—the main thing is that you have a place to spread out your notes and write without distractions.

You might be dreading this point. After all, writing is not always an easy process. My friend Maria enters into a deep depression when confronted with a writing assignment. This might sound extreme to you, but feelings of dread and anxiety often accompany the beginning of writing. It is equally true, however, that they will recede once you start. For this reason, I urge you to begin as soon as possible. Generally, the actual act of writing is nowhere near as unpleasant as the anticipation of it. I think of it as I would think of completing a crossword puzzle—work at it calmly until all the right words fall into place. So grab a snack (never work on an empty stomach!), find a comfortable spot to sit and work, spread your notes and images in front of you, and keep reading. And take heart: you are done with the hardest part—you have accumulated all the notes you will need and have given careful thought to your work. Composing the paper is now just a matter of organizing and presenting the information that you already possess.

The Introduction

Step 1: Write a Short Description of the Work You Have Chosen. The first section will serve to introduce your reader to the work of art. It should not be detailed, nor more than one or two sentences. It should describe the work in plain and simple terms, mentioning subject matter, medium, scale, and location. For example:

> *Menkaure and his Wife* is an Egyptian sculpture about four feet tall, made of slate, and located in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The royal couple stand together facing outward, and the queen wraps her arm around her husband's waist.

While it might seem like an obvious beginning, I can't tell you how many papers I have received that begin with a discussion of Menkaure's elbows! It helps here to remember the process of seeing itself. When you first see an object, do you immediately hone in on its details? Typically, no. So remember, when you write, *always to proceed from general to increasingly detailed observations.*

Step 2: State Your Main Argument. Your second step will be to express the main theme of your paper. What should it be? Think back to the first moment you encountered your work. Remember the feeling or thought that came to you? Was it fear, mystery, romantic love? Put your statement in objective terms, and avoid the word *I*. It might go something like this:

> The sculpture evokes a sense of permanence and unity, . . .

This is the first part of your thesis statement. You are arguing, in your paper, that permanence and timelessness are the ideas that this sculpture evokes.

Step 3: State (Briefly) the Ways in Which You Will Prove It. These themes, you should now realize, did not simply appear in your head at random. Choices in the subject matter and formal elements such as line, composition, color, and style helped to create it. The main goal of your paper will be to describe *how this idea or feeling, so central to your response to the work, was created by artistic choices.* So, despite the innocuous name of "response" or "description" paper, this is really meant to be an *argument—your argument,* for why the work is so powerful. This does *not* mean you should second-guess the intentions of the artist. What

he or she meant by the work is less important, for the purposes of this paper, than the effect the work has on you.

So the second part of your thesis statement might read:

> . . . and this is evoked through the materials used, the composition, the relationship and poses of the figures, and the style.

Writing the Main Body

Step 1: Sketching an Outline. Having established your main argument, and the ways in which you will prove it, you may now proceed to the paper's main body. Here, you will detail the evidence for your argument, focusing on the elements you cited in your thesis statement. At this point you might be asking yourself, "Which element should I discuss first?" In general, it is advisable to *build up to your strongest points.* Think about what most strongly contributed to the work's overall effect on you. End with that. In the case of a paper on *Menkaure and his Wife* (fig. 29), you might want to begin with a discussion of materials and conclude with a section on the poses of the figures.

In the case of the main body, it might be useful to sketch a quick outline before beginning to write. Give each of your sections a heading such as "pose" or "figural type." Then, after each heading, provide a description of that element in your work. Be as detailed and vivid as possible. Consider again the example of the paper on *Menkaure and his Wife* (fig. 29). An outline of its main body would look like this:

II. Main Body

A. materials

1. slate
2. greyish black stone
3. looks hard and smooth
4. gives sense of unchangingness, stillness

B. composition

1. the two forms are physically attached to each other
2. little space between them
3. seem to form a single, stable mass
4. this also gives a sense of unity and stability

C. Facial Expressions

1. the expressions of the couple seem blank
2. mouths are closed and still
3. this adds to the sense of unchangingness

D. Treatment of the Figures

1. Figure type

   a. they seem youthful
   b. he has broad shoulders and a narrow waist
   c. she has a very slim, soft-looking body
   d. she is covered with a transparent garment that emphasizes her body

2. Pose

   a. they seem stiff and erect
   b. no twisting or shifting of weight
   c. these qualities also gives a sense of stillness and timelessness

Note how the sections above were organized in terms of art-historical elements (materials, composition, facial expressions, and treatment of the figures). Then came a description of how the work in question used those elements. In the case of *Menkaure and his Wife,* the composition consists of two forms that are attached to each other. Finally, the sections end with a statement of how each element *contributes to the overall effect.* This is a restatement of your main thesis. Hence, in the example given, the figural pose of the Egyptian sculpture lends to its sense of timelessness. Do the same for the work you are writing about, going from category to category, and listing your points in outline form.

Step 2: Writing the Paragraphs. The above outline is rather abbreviated—you may very well have more descriptive details in your paragraphs. The more, the better. But it is also important to keep them ordered. Remember, each section of your outline should constitute a new paragraph. Moreover, as you start each new paragraph, *begin with your most general observation, and then list the details that support that observation.* Be as minute and painstaking as possible; remember, your job is to persuade the reader of your argument. At the end of each paragraph, tell the reader how those details support your main argument. Here is a sample paragraph from the main body of our paper on *Menkaure and his Wife* (fig. 29). (I have added annotations in bold to show you the paragraph's structure.)

(Subject heading: the pose of the figures): We get a sense of permanence from the way the figures are posed. They are not leaning over or in a casual pose. **(General observation):** In fact, they seem to be as stiff and rigid as boards. **(Detail 1):** The king has broad shoulders and does not slump at all; he holds them completely erect and straight. **(Detail 2):** His arms fall down to his sides and his hands are clenched into fists. **(Detail 3):** His wife, although smaller, also stands with broad, squared shoulders, and her neck and head are very erect. **(Detail 4):** Both stand without turning to one side, but are completely frontal. We also get a sense of permanence and unity from the positioning of the figures' legs and feet. Although they both appear to be striding forward, we really don't get the sense of motion. **(Detail 5):** Menkaure and his wife's legs and feet are not, as in a regular walking stride, more weighted on one side than the other; rather both the right and left sides are perfectly balanced. **(Concluding statement: *How* the details support the main argument):** For these reasons, the figures' poses give the impression that they are almost like geometric forms: solid and unchanging, and in this way, convey a sense of stillness and permanence.

Note how the writer has gone from making a general observation—the figures "seem to be as stiff and rigid as boards"—to citing specific examples of *how* they look stiff and rigid (erect shoulders, straight arms, clenched fists). Then, she has told us how this stiffness contributes to her main impression of the work ("they are almost like geometric forms: solid and unchanging . . .").

Having written up paragraphs for each important element of the work, you have now completed the main body of your paper. But let's say you have made other observations about the work that you would like to include, but which don't necessarily fit into your argument. If you feel they are important, you should include them, perhaps in a final paragraph before the conclusion. In the case of the paper on *Menkaure and his Wife,* you might also want to talk about how the two figures also convey ideas of unity. Whatever it might be, including such observations in a separate paragraph shows your professor that you have considered the work thoroughly, and also that you don't wish to interrupt the flow of your main argument. She will also appreciate your sense of organization.

Step 3: Writing the Conclusion. End your paper with a conclusion that reiterates your thesis statement, repeating both the particular message the

work conveys and the ways in which it is conveyed. This is sufficient. However, if you wish to go farther (and impress your professor even further), think, for a moment, about how the work relates to a larger issue. Let's take the example of *Menkaure and his Wife* (fig. 29) again. You have persuaded your reader that the work communicates the idea of permanence. Now you can afford to make a few speculations about why this idea seems to be so important in the work. You could make, for example, the following generalization:

> *Menkaure and his Wife* shows how the artistic choices in materials, composition, form, and so forth, can communicate a profound idea—perhaps that the idea of harmony and permanence were important in ancient Egypt. If we look, for example, to the pyramids, we also see a sense of wanting to preserve the past, to perpetuate the memory of powerful rulers. *Menkaure and his Wife* seems to belong to that way of thinking.

Some Further Tips on Writing

1. Be as detailed as possible. Your professor will appreciate it if you go into detail to support your observations.

2. But keep your details organized! Too often students will simply write up a muddle of interesting observations. Make sure to put them in a sequence. I often tell students to pretend they are describing the work to a blind person. Would you start by discussing an elbow?

3. Make an outline. This will spare you from producing one of the worst kinds of student papers I know—one that incites disappointment and displeasure in every professor: the one-paragraph paper. I am not referring here to length (although a paper less than the desirable number of pages is never a good idea); rather, I am referring to a three-page paper with no paragraph breaks. *Never do this.* It shows that you have no internal structure for your paper, and suggests that your ideas are muddled. Again, using an outline will solve this problem.

4. Forget that you are writing for a professor. I find that many of my students leave out important statements (for example, "this is a portrait of a man and wife" in the sculpture of *Menkaure and his Wife*). When asked why, they reply, "You are the professor—you already know all that!" Write as if your professor were just another student. This paper is your chance to be the teacher. Help your professor see the work as you see it.

5. Don't worry about flowery writing. Students will often try to impress their teacher with vocabulary they cannot control. Do not do this. It only frustrates your professor and makes your writing appear pretentious.

6. **Terms to avoid: "artwork" and "piece."**

7. **Number your pages.** Lack of pagination is an annoying but common error. If your paper is too short (or too long), omitting page numbers may be construed as an attempt to pull the wool over your professor's eyes.

8. **Provide an illustration.** If at all possible, include an image of the work and/or your own thumbnail sketch at the end of the paper.

9. **Always proofread.** It helps to read the paper aloud. This will highlight grammatical errors or awkwardness that would otherwise go unnoticed. For further guidance on issues of grammar and style, see Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (pp. 123–128: "Some Conventions of Usage") and Henry Sayre's *Writing About Art* (Appendix, pp. 124–137: "A Short Guide to Usage and Style").

10. **Have a friend read it.** This is even better than reading it aloud yourself.

4
The Art History Exam

The horror of the slide exam: the lights go down and the slides go up on the screen, with no professor to explain them. One minute per identification . . . ten minutes per comparison . . . The slides change, but you aren't done writing . . . WAKE UP! If you are already having nightmares about the upcoming exam, read on. This chapter will prepare you for the typical art history exam, guiding you through its different components: slide identifications, comparisons, essays, and unknowns (to name a few). It will also teach you to organize and prioritize your notes for study, suggest study aids for remembering images, and offer helpful hints for the process of taking slide exams.

You might be asking yourself, "Why bother with a chapter on how to take an exam?" After all, you have taken them before. How can art history exams be different from any others? If you come to the lectures, take notes, study, and do the reading, you will do well on the test, right? Maybe yes and maybe no. Art history exams are unique. First of all, they are primarily visual. Instead of focusing all your attention on a page of written questions, you will be asked to respond to a series of slides requiring identification, comparison, and analysis. Think about it: your study notes, concepts from the readings, the facts you need to memorize—all these will need to be recalled through images. There is another important

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