

Visual Analysis Assignment

Learning Objectives For This Assignment

- produce a written formal analysis of a work of art, describing what the object looks like in a clear fashion and utilizing correct art historical terminology.
- consider the ways in which art objects are displayed within public contexts, such as museums.

Instructions

1. Read the excerpt from Carol Duncan's book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (on Blackboard). You do not need to respond to this reading directly in your paper. It is simply an introduction to thinking about how museums display cultural artifacts.
2. Visit a Museum

You can visit any museum that you like, but remember that we have only covered a limited number of cultures and time periods in class thus far. Visiting a museum with collections that are similar to the objects viewed in class may help you to write a stronger paper. Here are two suggestions:

The Brooklyn Museum [www.brooklynmuseum.org]
The Metropolitan Museum of Art [www.metmuseum.org]

Make sure you check the museum's website **BEFORE** making your visit for information on hours and location. Please note that many museums are closed on Mondays—and some are closed on Tuesdays as well. Evening hours are often available at some point during the week. Bring your **STUDENT ID** for discounted admission prices. Both The Brooklyn Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art have “suggested” admission fees that allow you to pay what you are able. They also offer **FREE ADMISSION** on certain days of the month. Bring a **PENCIL** to take notes as most museums do not allow pens in the galleries.

3. Choose an Object

Again, choosing an object similar to those discussed in class may help you to write a stronger paper, but it is not required. Feel free to choose a work of sculpture, a painting, a drawing—anything that interests you. I suggest that you spend 5 to 10 minutes just *looking* at the artwork before writing anything down. This may seem like an inordinately long amount of time, but visual details often reveal themselves slowly. Also, regardless of your artistic skills, drawing an object is a great way to begin thinking about its formal qualities.

4. Write a Formal Analysis

The first part of your paper (approximately half of the paper or one page in length) will be a formal analysis of your chosen object—a description of the object's visual appearance. Begin this section by giving the object's basic identifying information—

the name of the artist and/or the culture of origin, title, date, medium, approximate dimensions, etc.. All of this information should be available on a typed label affixed somewhere near the object. Next, tell me what the object *actually is* if the title does not make it clear. Is it a relief sculpture? A coin? A piece of jewelry? A wall painting? An architectural fragment? If the artwork was made for a specific function or context (i.e., household item, temple decoration), tell me what that is—*briefly*—one to two sentences at the most.

The bulk of your formal analysis will involve describing in detail what your chosen object *looks like*. Review the “Starter Kit” in Stokstad if necessary to brush up on correct art historical terminology. Begin with general statements before moving on to more specific details. Does the object portray anything—a human figure? An outdoor scene? What kind of lines and shapes does the artist use? Are they curved or more jagged? What colors (if any) does the artist use? Are they warm in tone (orange, red, yellow)? Or cool (blue, green, purple)? What is the object’s texture like? If it is a three-dimensional object, does it project out into space? Or is it more self-contained? Describe the object’s composition—that is, how are its various forms arranged? Are most of the object’s visual features gathered into one area? Or are they spread across its surface? How does the medium (i.e., stone, paint, wood) affect the object’s appearance? **Please note that you do not need to answer all of these questions, as some of them will be more relevant to your chosen object than others.** When organizing descriptions of visual details, sometimes it is helpful to work from the top-down or from the left to the right. If there is a centralized form that dominates the composition, perhaps you can begin by describing that before moving on to background details. Basically, tell me *what* you are seeing and *where* it is located.

DO NOT include in-depth information about the artist’s biography, the object’s history, or contextual information about its culture of origin. Give me just enough background information so that I know what it is that you are describing. **THIS PAPER REQUIRES NO OUTSIDE RESEARCH.** You will not receive credit for an extended analysis of the object’s style or function or for summarizing what scholars have written about it.

5. Analyze the Object’s Context Within the Museum

For this section (approximately half of the paper or one page in length), make sure your paper clearly states the **NAME OF THE MUSEUM** that you visited and the **NUMBER OF THE GALLERY/ROOM** in which your artwork is displayed. Tell me where your object was located within the museum. Was it near the main entrance? Or tucked away in a room on the third floor? What was the display space like? Was it large or small? Dark or light-filled? Were there many objects on display in the gallery or only a few? Was your chosen object displayed next to similar objects or different ones? Was it hung on a wall, placed on a pedestal, or mounted in a display case?

Imagine that you are a curator—the person in charge of selecting and arranging the museum objects on display. Why do you think your object is positioned where it is? What kind of messages is the museum trying to send with regards to the way it is displayed? Would you have chosen to display it differently? If so, why?

Again, you do not necessarily need to answer all of these questions, but rather address the issues that are most relevant to your particular *viewing experience*.

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Unfortunately, every semester there are students who choose to disregard the College's no-cheating policy and find themselves subject to disciplinary action. If I learn that you have been less-than-honest in preparing an assignment or taking an exam, you will receive a failing grade on that item. If I find that you have violated the policy a second time, you will receive a failing grade for the course.