

## Different Approaches to Understanding Works of Art

- - -

### Formal Analysis

Formal analysis is a specific type of visual description. Unlike ekphrasis, it is not meant to evoke the work in the reader's mind. Instead it is an explanation of visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition. Strictly speaking, subject is not considered and neither is historical or cultural context. The purest formal analysis is limited to what the viewer sees. Because it explains how the eye is led through a work, this kind of description provides a solid foundation for other types of analysis. It is always a useful exercise, even when it is not intended as an end in itself.

All formal analysis identifies specific visual elements and discusses how they work together. If the goal of a writer is to explain how parts combine to create a whole, and what effect that whole has on the viewer, then this type of analysis is essential. It also can be used to define visual characteristics shared by a number of objects. When the similarities seem strong enough to set a group of objects apart from others, they can be said to define a "style." Stylistic analysis can be applied to everything from works made during a single period by a single individual to a survey of objects made over centuries. All art historians use it.

- - -

### Stylistic Analysis

The term "style" refers to the resemblance works of art have to one another. Enough visual elements must be shared by enough works to make their combination distinctive and recognizable to a number of people. A single cathedral cannot define the Gothic style any more than a single sculpture can define the style of its artist. Furthermore, the idea must convey meaning to enough people to become widely used. Art history is filled with stylistic definitions that were proposed but never adopted, or did not survive for long. This is not surprising. Ideas and tastes change, different things seem important at different times, and there always are major works that do not fit into a particular definition of a style. These exceptions offer constant challenge to any accepted order.

### Period Style

The concept of period style first appeared in the writings of the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Often called the father of art history, Winckelmann developed a historical framework for Greek sculpture that was based on the way the objects looked. The Greeks and the Romans also had written about the works, but their histories and guides primarily discussed specific masterpieces or great artists. Winckelmann, on the other hand, created a structure that relied upon visual characteristics, which he defined with beautiful ekphrastic passages about individual sculptures.<sup>43</sup> This meant that it was possible to relate anonymous works about which little was known to the most famous art of the Ancient world. It also meant that an individual object could be considered, for example, a late example of a style. Date of making no longer determined the group in which a work was placed.

At least as important as Winckelmann's definition of style was his adoption of a biological model for its structure. Every style has to have boundaries, places where it begins and ends, and Winckelmann conceived of these in terms of the sequence of natural growth. Each style began with its birth (the early stage), progressed to maturity (the middle or classic phase), a decline (the late) and, finally, disappearance. Using this scheme arranges works into a very specific order and it is an order that implies value judgments. Early or late examples, which in Winckelmann's view stand at the beginning or end of a style, are necessarily incomplete and thus imperfect. The mature, often called the classic, represents the fullest, the best, definition of the style.<sup>44</sup> This order is so common in modern art history that it is hard to conceive of it as the result of choices. Lang's definition of style, however, explained above, reminds us how much this scheme too depends upon interpretation.

Using variations of Winckelmann's model, historians and critics have created definitions of period style for many other kinds of art. One of the most important was developed by Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) in Principles of Art History, published in German in 1915 and still read in English translation today. Two aspects of his book have been particularly influential. First is the way Wölfflin defined period style. He believed that analysis of particular works of art would "reveal the connection of the part to the whole"<sup>45</sup> and he decisively rejected the "analogy of bud, bloom, decay."<sup>46</sup> He created groups, not sequences, and defined their boundaries by opposing different uses of the same formal elements. This method of analyzing by opposition and comparison is still the way many art historical lectures are organized. Wölfflin took for granted that his groups were ultimately arbitrary, and discussed how many other ways the same material could be divided.<sup>47</sup>

The specific concepts used by Wölfflin to define certain period styles have been very influential. The idea of "linear" versus "painterly," linked to a fundamental change in the way European art from the 15th and 16th centuries looks compared to that from the 17th century, still appears in survey texts today.<sup>48</sup> Historians also continue to use the word "painterly." The other pairs Wölfflin explained in Principles have been less influential: plane/recession, closed/open form, multiplicity/unity, and clearness/unclearness.<sup>49</sup>

Even in translation, Wölfflin's analyses of particular works of art are exceptional. Like Winckelmann, he wrote about what he saw masterfully. His application of the concept of the painterly to sculpture, for example, results in a beautiful and vivid description of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's bust of Cardinal Borghese (Borghese Gallery, Rome):

The surfaces and folds of the garment are not only of their very nature restless, but are fundamentally envisaged with an eye to the plastically indeterminate. There is a flicker over the surfaces and the form eludes the exploring hand. The highlights of the folds flash away like lizards, just like the highlights, heightened with white, which Rubens introduces into his drawings. The total form is no longer seen with a view to the silhouette. . . . [The shoulders have] a contour which, restless in itself, at all points leads the eye beyond the edge [of the sculpture]. The same play is continued in the head. Everything is arranged with a view to the impression of change. It is not the open mouth which makes the bust baroque, but the fact that the shadow between the lips is regarded as something plastically indeterminate. . . . [I]t is fundamentally the same design that we found [above] in [paintings by] Frans Hals and Lievens. For the transformation of the substantial into the unsubstantial which has only a visual reality, hair and eyes are in this case always especially characteristic. The "look" is here obtained by three holes in each eye.

Wölfflin summed up the alternative, the linear style, in one sentence about a portrait bust of Pietro Mellini by

Benedetto da Majano (Museo Nazionale, Florence): “The essential point is that the form is enclosed in a firm silhouette, and that each separate form – mouth, eyes, the separate wrinkles – has been given an appearance of determinateness and immobility based on the notion of permanence.”<sup>50</sup>

Through this and many other comparisons, Wölfflin argued for a division between the two periods, based on a fundamental change in the artistic style. “The whole notion of the pictorial has shifted. The tactile picture has become the visual picture – the most decisive revolution which art history knows.”<sup>51</sup> Although he found the linear and the painterly in other places and periods – Impressionist painting, for example, was painterly – it was the movement from what we still call the Renaissance to the Baroque that interested him most deeply.

- - -

## The Biography

Although visual and stylistic analyses are fundamental to the practice of art history, the most familiar way of grouping art is by artist. The relationship is so close that common English usage drops the “by” in “a painting by Manet,” so that it becomes “a Manet painting” or even “a Manet.” In the last, only the small word “a” indicates that the “Manet” being discussed is an object rather than a person. This assumption of an intimate and important connection between the maker and the made has very practical implications. It rests on the belief that the actual historical person matters, the person who was born on a certain day and died on another. Exactly how and why the person matters is what determines how and why the life is important. This, in turn, will determine the questions considered in a biography. Like all assumptions of critical analysis, biographical ones should be examined closely.

The identity of the artist has been regarded as one of the most important facts about a work of art for centuries in the West. Beginning with the Greeks, names of great artists have seemed to be worth recording, and stories about them exist even when their works do not. Pliny the Elder and Pausanias, two Romans whose writings are among the richest sources of information about Greek art, approached their subjects as today’s art historians do – from the distance of centuries, gathering what was said in older sources without necessarily having seen the original works.<sup>52</sup> The first history of art in the post-Classical world, Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, published in Italy in the mid-16th century, also organizes the art in terms of the biographies of its makers. Since Vasari was a contemporary or near-contemporary of the artists, his vivid anecdotes suggest the authority of personal knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

- - -

## Iconographic Analysis

Considering a work of art in terms of the life of the person who made it creates one kind of historical context. There are many other ways to relate a work to history, though, involving different elements of the period from which it came. One of them is an iconographic analysis, which establishes the meaning a work of art had at the time it was made. This may or may not include what the maker of the work intended or, usually a more important factor, what the person who paid for the work wanted. Any particular time or place provides different possible audiences, each of which will demand specific kinds of information and make certain assumptions. The iconographic argument always depends upon assembling historical evidence to reconstruct these things.

Like all types of art historical analysis, an iconographic analysis must begin with what can be seen in the object or objects being considered. On the basis of these observations, the objects are related to other visual images and, probably, texts. This process may involve considerable historical research in primary sources and many languages, or a single reference to an authoritative secondary source. The result may be more than one interpretation. If they are mutually exclusive, the historian and the reader must decide which one seems most convincing. More often, though, different interpretations address different aspects of the work, so all of them can be historically accurate.

In the easiest case, a work of art depicts a subject that can be identified by anyone who knows what to look for. A handful of scenes from the life of Jesus, for example, appear again and again in Christian art. Just a few details are all it takes to turn a picture of a woman and an angel into an Annunciation, or a mother and a baby in a stable into a Nativity scene. Images like these were meant to be understood by many people, and they use well-established traditions that lasted for centuries. Research is needed to understand how a particular example differs from others and why that matters, or who created it and who paid for it, but the basic subject is clear. Something for which there is no known context, on the other hand, or that describes private feelings of the artist or patron, may be very hard to interpret.

- - -

## Historical Analysis

Iconographic analysis is used to establish the meaning of a particular work at a particular time. To identify the subject of an altarpiece as a Madonna and Child, however, explains nothing about the use of the altarpiece, how it fit into the surrounding culture, its economic import, or what it may reveal about social and political issues of the period. These questions apply most naturally to the study of objects from the past, but the same methods can be applied to contemporary art. What matters is the way the context is described and what kinds of relationships are established between it and the work or works being studied. This type of analysis is richest when it creates a web of very specific connections. To juxtapose a few generalizations about a historical context with a work from the period without suggesting any particular relationships between the two does not reveal very much.

Like so many kinds of writing about art, historical analysis became the subject of sustained investigation during the 19th century by scholars writing in German. Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) wrote the first major studies of art as an aspect of culture in his books about the Italian Renaissance, published during the 1860s. The idea that art should be considered primarily in terms of the economic structure that produced it rather than aesthetics was explored by Karl Marx (1818-1883). The influence on art of culture in its broadest definition, including politics, religion, and social conventions, as well as popular imagery and magical or irrational beliefs, became the subject of systematic study by Aby Warburg (1866-1929) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Different sorts of questions have been asked in the past few decades, as art historians have considered feminism, gender studies, and the impact of colonialism.<sup>77</sup>