

## ELEMENTS OF PAINTING ANALYSIS

An analysis of a painting, or any work of art, should address six basic questions: who, what, when, where, how, and why. The answers to these questions are so interdependent that the order in which they are posed depends upon the evidence of each individual painting and upon the viewer's own sense of priorities.

### I. Formal Analysis

The subject of a painting deals entirely with its visual properties, regardless of subject matter and interpretation. Some things to consider:

1. Format. What is the size of the painting? What is the proportion of height to width? What is the relation of forms or shapes to frame? Does the frame respect the integrity of the forms or cut them off? Does the interaction of frame and forms produce harmony or tension? ("Frame" in this context refers to the perimeter of the pictorial area.)
2. Composition. (the organization of shapes within the pictorial area and their interrelationships). Simple or complex? Geometrically ordered or free and seeming accidental? Symmetrical or asymmetrical? Variety of repetition of forms? Are some forms dominant over others? Is the organization of shapes crowded or spacious? How do the shapes relate to each other in size and placement? Do the organization and repetition of forms establish a dominant geometry or rhythm?
3. Individual Objects. Many or few? Large or small (both in relation to the outside world and to the picture area)? What ranges of sizes? Regular or irregular shapes? What kind of pattern do they form? What proportion of solid and "broken-up" areas? Emphasis on center or marginal areas? Degree of ornateness? Are the forms bulging or flat?
4. Line. Are the forms defined by lines? Are the lines clear or blurred? Angular or curved? Static or active? Subservient (as boundaries, for example) or assertive? Are there lines at all?
5. Color. What is the range of color (palette)? Many or few? Is one color dominant? What is the range of values (brightness or lightness)? Of saturation (intensity)? Are the colors pure or mixed? Warm or cool? Light or dark? Bright or subdued? Are the contrasts moderate or extreme? How is color used in relation to composition? Large or small areas? Isolation or repetition?
6. Light. Natural or artificial? Is there a single and consistent source? Is the source inside or outside of the painting or both? Degree or angle? Strong or muted contrasts? Degree of clarity? Is the light even or spotty? How is it used (to clarify forms or space, or to emphasize mood)?



7. Space. Clear or unclear? Shallow or deep? Illusion of three dimensions or two-dimensional (flat)? How is the illusion of space created? By overlapping? Linear perspective? Aerial (atmospheric) perspective? Foreshortening? Modeling in light and dark? Diminution (relative reduction of scale)? Varying color values and intensities? Are there levels or planes of space (foreground, middle ground, background)? Is the main interest near or far?
8. Technique. What material is used for support (wood, canvas, paper, etc.)? What kind of medium (oil, tempera, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, etc.)? Agency of application (brush, knife, gravity, etc.)? If brush, what kind (wide or fine, soft or stiff)? How is the paint applied (in strokes or layers? Spits? Thickly or smoothly? Evenly or unevenly)? Are strokes evident? Do they vary? Are the paints transparent or opaque?
9. Texture. What is the texture of the painted surface? Does the artist vary stroke and paint thickness to convey the carrying textures of objects?
10. General Observation. How consistent is the structure of the whole? What degree of variety or sameness? Does the work seem calculated or spontaneous? Carefully planned or improvised? Is the effect loud or intimate, monumental or trifling, solemn or gay, ascetic or opulent, etc.?

## II. Subject Matter

Paintings may be categorized according to six traditional classes: History, portraiture, landscape, still-life, genre (everyday life), and abstraction. The identification of subject matter (iconography) involves such questions as:

1. General. Is the painting representational, abstract, or non-objective? What objects are represented? Are the objects contemporary to the artist or historical? Does the painting have a narrative (that is, tell a story)? If so, what is the source of the narrative: literature, history, religion, or mythology?
2. Portraits. How much of the figure is shown? How large is it within the frame? What kind of background or setting? What kind of action? Any indication of trade, profession, class, etc.? How does the figure relate to the spectator? Intimate or aloof? What kind of clothing (rich or plain, tight or loose-fitting, formal or casual, etc.)? Proportion of head to body? What aspects are stressed? Exaggerations or deviations from norm?
3. Figural Scenes. What kind of story (historical, religious, mythological, allegorical, genre, etc.)? Quiet or dramatic action? Many figures or a few? Small or large in relation to the size of the picture? Full-length or cut off? What kind of setting? Indoors or out? What role does the setting play? In the main action stressed or obscured?



4. Landscape. Proportion of earth to sky, plain to elevation, water to land, etc.? Is a large or small area visible? What is the general character (attractive, calm, forbidding, stormy, monumental, intimate, etc.)? Which elements determine the effect? Is it "real" or imaginary, stylized or detailed, accessible or obstructed, concentrated or diffuse, varied or monotonous? What evidence of human activity? Is this activity an important or negligible part of the picture?

### III. Interpretation

The interpretation of a painting draws on formal analysis and iconography in order to answer the question of why. The art historian assumes the task of discovering the relationship between the visual properties of a painting and its meaning.

1. What is the relationship between the visual properties of the painting and its subject matter? How does the artist use format, composition, line, color, light, space, technique, and texture to express a dominant theme or mood?
2. What is the historical meaning of the subject matter (iconology)?
3. How does the painting express the artists' particular point of view? What biographical factors are significant?
4. What was the intended function of the painting? How might the function have determined its visual properties and subject matter?
5. Did the painting evolve from an ongoing creative process? Did the artist make use of preparatory drawings, models, photographs, etc.? Did the artist's intentions change during this process?
6. How does the painting relate, in terms of style and theme, to other works of the same period?
7. What is the meaning of the painting?

Remember always that you must be able to justify your conclusions by observations which can be checked by others. Avoid "reading into the picture" qualities which really come from your own attitudes, convictions, or sympathies. Distinguish between the given "data" and your own associations.

