# Visual Art Toolkit

When we consider the content of the work, we evaluate the form of the artwork. This means that we consider the artist's use of the various elements and principles of art (i.e. line, shape, form, color, texture, space, etc.) individually rather than in combination. Due to this focus on form and individual observation, this kind of analysis is often called formalism or visual analysis.

Formal or visual analysis of an artwork is more than merely a description of what we see. Description tends to combine visual elements or principles and reveals how a viewer understands them. The statement, for instance, "the woman sits on a chair," may be an accurate description of an image, and it reveals that the viewer understands the various elements that the artist used in that image (line, color, etc.) to suggest a woman sitting on a chair. It is conceivable that someone with different life experiences might draw up a different description. They may combine the various elements and principles of design differently. And both of these viewers may miss important aspects of the work because they are focused on aspects of the work that they believe they can readily decode. It is often easier to understand the combination of line and color in the representation of the human form, for instance, than it is to comprehend the artist's emphasis on certain figures based on scale.

Visual or formal analysis is distinct from description because we focus on individual elements without combining them. It takes time, and it forces the viewer to observe deeply. Often this causes the viewer to become aware of aspects of the painting that were missed previously. It is a dissection of the work’s design elements in connection to how the viewer interacts with the work. Artists consciously use the various elements and principles of art to guide the viewer toward a particular way of seeing. Let's explore these elements.

## Scale

Scale refers to at least two significant attributes in a work of art. First, it refers to the overall size of the work of art (works may be very large or very small). Second, it refers to the relative size of the various elements within the work of art (the size of the book compared to the size of the person holding it). In either sense, authors use the scale to intentionally contribute to their overall meaning.

### Questions to consider

Consider the work’s use of **scale** by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* What is the size of the work and how does that relate to the viewing experience?
* How do the objects in the work relate to one another in terms of size?
* How does the artist use scale to support the other elements of the composition (such as composition or pictorial space)?

## Composition

In visual art, the term composition refers to the arrangement or placement of the various elements of the work within the image or work. Artists consider deeply how each form or element interacts with other forms or elements of the work to transmit meaning without adding a verbal description.

### Questions to consider

Consider the **composition**of the work by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* How is the work organized?
* How are the figures arranged within the artwork?
* How does the artist delineate various planes (foreground, middleground, background)
* What is suggested by the way the figures are positioned and posed?

## Pictorial Space

A work of visual art takes place within a space designated for the artwork, whether a canvas, a physical space for a statue, or a geographical location. An artist may choose to use that pictorial space in various meaningful ways. They may create a naturalistic illusion through perspective, giving the viewer the idea that they are looking "into" a painting as though it were a window into another world. They may emphasize or respond to the space by producing their object in a way that requires a certain method of viewing (such as with some sculptures). They may organize their space systematically to enhance the idea of balance (or its absence).

### Questions to consider

Consider the work’s **pictorial space** by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* How does the artist manage the space within the artwork?
* How does the artist create the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface?
* What role does overlapping, linear or atmospheric perspective, or orthogonal lines play?

## Form

To speak of form in the visual arts is to speak of shapes within the work's pictorial space. These shapes may be figurative (in the form of a figure), natural (in the form of a part of nature) or built (the form of something produced). In addition, forms may be abstract or representational. Depending on the form depicted, the artist may attempt to represent a three-dimensional form in a two-dimensional plane.

### Questions to consider

Consider the use of **forms** in the work by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* How does the artist represent solids in space in the work?
* What kinds of forms are used (natural, figurative, built, etc.)
* Are the forms naturalistic (they are depicted as you see them) or are they modified in some way?

## Line

Line is perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of visual art. Artist's use lines (or the suggestion of a line) to represent forms within pictorial space, create harmony between various elements of a work, or draw the viewer's gaze in a particular direction.

### Questions to consider

Consider the role **line** has in the artwork by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* How does the artist distinguish the various elements (forms) of the artwork?
* What sorts of lines (curvilinear, rectilinear, etc.) are more prominent? Why did the artist make this choice?
* Does the artist use imaginary or construction lines to draw your eye in a particular direction (like in one-point perspective)?

## Color

The use of color is one of the unique features in some mediums of the visual arts. Artists use color to highlight various aspects of their work through contrast or comparison. When observing a work of art, consider the affect of the colors on the overall artwork and on the interpretation of the viewer.

### Questions to consider

Consider the artist’s use of **color**by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* What color palate does the artist employ in the work?
* Do the selected colors contrast or complement one another?
* How does the artist organize colors throughout the artwork (color theory)?

## Light

In some styles of the visual arts, the role of light is extraordinarily important. In some ways, in their use of light visual artists adopt principles of theater in their work. They can highlight or minimize certain aspects of a work merely through techniques of illumination. This is true for light depicted within a work (such as in a painting) or external light (such as the light that illuminates a sculpture).

### Questions to consider

Consider how **light**is depicted in the work by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* What role does illumination play in the work? How is it organized?
* Is there a light source?
* How does the artist depict light and dark throughout the work (chiaroscuro)?

## Tone

In the visual arts, tone refers to the shade of a particular color, its lightness or darkness. Although it is related to questions of color, the use of tone is a discrete element of the visual arts that artists regularly employ. While an artist may adopt a small color pallette, for instance, he or she may employ a wide variety of tones from within that limited selection.

### Questions to consider

Consider the use of **tone**by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* How does the artist use various light or dark shades of a specific color? To what effect?
* In what way does tone distinguish various elements within the work?
* How does tone contribute to pictorial space, texture, or line?

## Texture

Visual artists use texture in two distinct ways. First, they suggest textures through their careful attention to detail. Second, they produce physical textures by creating or incorporating materials with varying degrees of smoothness or roughness.

### Questions to consider

Consider the various **textures**depicted in the work by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* What techniques does the artist employ to depict various materials in the artwork?
* How does the artist contribute to the work's verisimilitude (the true-to-life quality) through the depiction of various materials or surfaces?

## Pattern

Pattern is an important tool for visual artists to communicate ideas of balance or unity within a work (or the lack thereof).

### Questions to consider

What **patterns**are evident in the work by thinking about questions such as (but not limited to):

* What sorts of repeated forms are evident in the work (organic or inorganic)?
* How does the artist respond to the conflict between the use of this repetition and the use of pictorial space?

The following video is an explanation of these terms in connection to a specific work of art. While the video is a helpful explanation, it is simultaneously a wonderful example of excellent formal analysis.

**Video Transcript**

We're in the National Gallery in London, standing in front of Giovanni Bellini's the Madonna of the Meadow. This is a Renaissance painting from Venice. But we wanted to talk about it, as a vehicle to highlight the tools of visual analysis.

So here's what we're not gonna talk about. We're not gonna talk about iconography, how this painting fits in with the history of paintings of the Madonna and Child. We're not gonna talk about the symbolism that we might see in some of the animals in the background. We're not gonna talk about the commission or who the patron was.

We're not gonna talk about the political, social, or economic context in which this painting was made. Instead, we're gonna focus on the things we can see. So we're gonna talk about scale, composition, pictorial space, form, line, color, light, tone, texture, and pattern.

Let's start with the issue of scale. So here we can talk about the scale of the painting, and the scale of the figures, and what we see in the painting.

Well, we're in a gallery with paintings of all different sizes, there are very large altar pieces, and there are some very small paintings as well. This is a moderately sized painting, and that changes where we stand in relationship to the painting. When you stand in front of a very large painting, you tend to stand back, we want to take it all in. Whereas when you walk up to a very small painting, we tend to come in very close, to see as much as we can.

Composition

We see a female figure who's smaller than life size.

But she fills a third of the frame.

And that brings us to the composition. Not only does she fill a third of the frame, but the clothing that she's wearing, the drapery spreads out across the bottom length of the painting.

Creating, in essence, a pyramid. The base of a pyramid is broad.

And pyramids are a very stable form. We also notice that the child in her lap is contained within the pyramidal shape of her body. So there is an intimacy that is created between the female figure and the child.

The artist has placed her very close to the foreground, so that she towers over the horizon line, and is clearly the primary subject. But there is also a significant amount of landscape that surrounds her, that, in a sense, frames her. Bellini has created this pyramidal foreground, in front of a series of what are really horizontal bands, that move back into space. You see a band in the foreground of greenery, then there's a band of pebbles, then there's a band of tilled farmland, and even the clouds create horizontal bands in the sky.

She's framed on one side by trees, and on the other side by the vertical forms of the architecture.

Another way we can talk about composition, is to think about the way in which the artist has composed the bodies of the figures. Look at the lovely, gentle tilt to the Virgin Mary's head, which corresponds to the angle of the Christ Child's head. But I'm also struck by the volume in between the hands of the Virgin Mary, who holds her fingertips together, defining an internal space, that has the same kind of volume as her own head and that of the child.

The diagonal line that forms the slope of her right shoulder corresponds to the diagonal line of her forearm, and the diagonal line of the child's body. So we have this echoing of forms, that helps to unify the composition.

Let's turn next to pictorial space.

We should acknowledge that we're looking at a flat surface. And that what the artist is doing is creating an illusion of three-dimensional form and an illusion of space on this flat surface. Let's start with the figure, she's seated on the ground with the child on her lap. So we have, immediately, a sense of one thing in front of another because of overlapping.

But in addition, the pictorial space is defined by what we would call atmospheric and linear perspective. If we look at the sky at the top of the painting, the sky that is closest to us, it has deep, rich blues. And as the sky moves back in space, Analysis towards the horizon, it becomes paler. Look at the mountains in the distance, how they've become paler and bluer. This is a technique that's meant to replicate the natural phenomena of looking at a great distance, looking through more atmosphere. Details become less vivid, color becomes paler, things become bluer.

We also notice a little bit of linear perspective if we look at the plowed field. Where we see diagonal lines that appear to recede into the distance, that lead our eye back into space.

Those lines are called orthogonals. They meet at a vanishing point, which in the context of this painting, is obscured by the Virgin Mary and Child in the foreground. But which nevertheless creates a sense of logic, and places us, the viewer, in a particular point in space, in relationship to the image that we're seeing.

Let's turn next to the question of form.

Generally, when we speak about form, we're thinking about the representation of solids in space, and it's instructive to think about the variety of types of form that the artist is representing.

Well we have the natural forms, we have trees, and grass, and fields, and mountains, and clouds. We also have figurative forms, the Madonna and Child in the foreground, but we also have built forms, we have the architecture in the background. Some of these forms are rounded and curvilinear, like the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, or even the clouds. And some of them are rectilinear like the architecture in the background.

Some of them feel very solid, like the figures in the foreground. And some of the form is far more delicate, look at the handling, for example, of the leaves on the trees.

Those forms are established just by touches of color from the artist's brush. Now form is often defined by line. And, in fact, there are contour lines used to demarcate and separate forms. So, for example, separating the Virgin Mary's drapery from the grass that she sits on. And we also have places where we have line on its own, for example, in the branches of the tree. Line is also sometimes the corners of forms, I'm looking at the line that forms the edge of the squared turret.

Next we wanted to talk about color.

One is immediately struck by the rich blue of the Virgin's mantle. But also the deep blue of the sky. And that contrast with the earth colors, the browns and the greens that we see in the fields around and behind her.

There are essentially three main color groups. There's the brilliant blue of the Virgin's mantle, of the sky, of the mountains. There's the red of her undergarment. And then there's the yellows of the flesh, of the fields, and of the architecture. These are the three primary colors.

We see white in the shawl that she wears around her head, and also in the clouds. So Mary is connected with the heavens.

Color is in someways a function of light, and here the artist has created a sense of the broad light of a clear day.

The light from the sun seems to be coming from the left, maybe a little bit forward from the figures.

And high in the sky.

And we see the clouds illuminated from above, there in shadow below, similarly with the Virgin Mary, if we look at her right forearm, it's illuminated from above, but in shadow below.

And so the artist has taken pains to create a consistent of use of light and shadow. That is, shadow is always in accordance with the source of that light.

Look at Virgin Mary's face, her right cheek is illuminated, but the left side of her cheek is in shadow, and we have the sense of moving tones from light into darkness, what art historians often call chiaroscuro. And this helps to create a form that looks three-dimensional, that appears to exist in space.

But light and color are both closely related to tone as well.

And tone refers to the amount of light and darkness in a color.

And we can see that in many parts of this painting, we can see it in the cloak of the Virgin Mary, but it's probably most subtly handled in the representation of flesh. Looking at the beautiful rendering of the Virgin Mary's face, and the smooth brushwork, makes me aware of the variety of textures within this painting. And the contrast that the artist is creating between the smooth textures of the flesh, or of the cloth that the figures wear, in comparison to the rough, pebbly surface that we see in the middle ground.

Or we could look at the featheriness of the leaves on the trees which are yet another texture.

Texture's a tool that artists can use to create a sense of veracity, as they define different kinds of form.

And texture is intimately related to the materials that the artist is using. Here, we know it's oil paint, which is well suited to the depiction of different textures.

Let's talk next about pattern. You might not expect to see pattern in a landscape, which is filled with natural forms because pattern is the repetition of a form over and over again. Often to create a decorative field.

Here, we see ornamentation in the Virgin Mary's blue robe, we see some gold embroidery.

But if you look closely, there is a soft, organic pattern, especially in the foreground, in the foliage.

We do see the repetition of leaf forms, and grass forms, that look almost like a carpet, like a decorative field, than the unruliness of nature.

And one of the results of pattern, is that it is often in conflict with pictorial space, with the illusionistic depth that the artist renders. And even here, it seems as if that green field stands up a little bit, in a way that remind us that this is in fact a two-dimensional surface. So by looking at scale, at composition, at pictorial space, at form, line, color, light, tone, at the textures and the patterns, we have an opportunity to look closely at the painting. But these are only a few of the tools that art historians use to discuss and explore works of art.

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