Art & Art History: Formal Analysis & Comparative Analysis

Although a work of art can be analyzed on multiple levels and in multiple contexts, several key details are almost always addressed in formal analyses and comparative analyses. This handout provides helpful questions to ask about a piece of art in order to direct attention to the most salient details in the often-overwhelming amount of information any one work possesses. These questions should be considered, but only addressed in the final analysis if they are relevant details to the overall meaning and impact of the work.

**Formal Analysis:**
A formal analysis is quite simply an analysis of the forms utilized in the work of art. It is a close inspection of the artist’s use of aspects such as color, shape, line, mass, and space. The formal analysis moves beyond simple description in that it connects the elements of the work to the effects they have on the viewer. Considering this connection enables the writer to discuss the meaning of the work.

Begin with a brief but thorough description of the work.
• What is the title?
• Who is the artist?
• What year was it created?
• What is the physical condition of the work? Is it dirty, clean, restored?

Include historical information.
• What country or region was it made in?
• Does it belong to a particular movement, age, or school of thought?
• Does it have an influential patron?
• Is this work typical or atypical of its period, style, or artist? What artistic influences can be seen in the artist’s work?

Analyze the work itself.
How does the art “work?” That is, what details in the piece are used to convey its meaning? Consider how these details function by themselves and together as a whole.

**Architecture and Space:**
• What is the form of the structure, and what is the function? How do form and function complement each other?
• Is the structure useful? How do people move throughout the structure? Are there significant accommodations or restrictions to this movement?
• Is the building or space structurally sound, given its location, design, and materials?
• What role does daylight play? Is the inside bright or somber?
• Do the exterior and interior complement each other? Is either adorned with ornamentation in the form of statuary, color, or paintings?
Paintings, Drawings, and Etchings:

- How does the artist use color? Are there stark contrasts or is it blended? Are there symbolic meanings behind the color choices?
- How does the artist use line? Are forms linearly arranged or disordered? Are there geometric shapes implied by the forms in the piece?
- Are the forms in the piece realistic or abstract? Are they fully one style or do they mix the two?

Sculpture and 3-D Pieces:
- What is the medium of the piece, and how does it affect the viewer's impression? (For example, stone gives a sense of permanence and strength.)
- What was the purpose of this piece? In what setting was it originally placed?
- Is the piece unusually large or small?
- Is the piece representational or abstract? Is the artist exploring forms or space within forms?
- Is the piece a portrait of a person? What type of impression does it give of the subject? Is the pose strong or relaxed? Are there objects with the person?

Comparative Analysis:

The comparative analysis starts with a formal analysis of two or more individual pieces, and then adds another level of discussion that evaluates relevant similarities and differences between the pieces. This added level is useful in revealing details about trends within historical periods, regional similarities, or growth of an individual artist over time.

- In describing the individual pieces, keep to the same conventions used when doing an individual formal analysis.
- Ask yourself why this comparison is relevant. There is a wealth of information in why your professor has asked for a comparison of two particular pieces.
- Depending on the length and complexity of comparison, one of the two following basic structures will be more appropriate:
  - “Lumping” involves discussing all details of one work, and then all details of the second work. This method is preferred in lengthy or broad comparisons to avoid zipping back and forth between the works too quickly. Remember to compare the two works by referring back to the first work when discussing the second. This will ensure that you don’t simply write two descriptions.
  - “Splitting” involves discussing a particular point in both works before moving on to another point. This method is preferred in comparisons dealing with fine details instead of a broader look at each work as a whole. Remember to discuss each point evenly to maintain a clear, parallel structure.