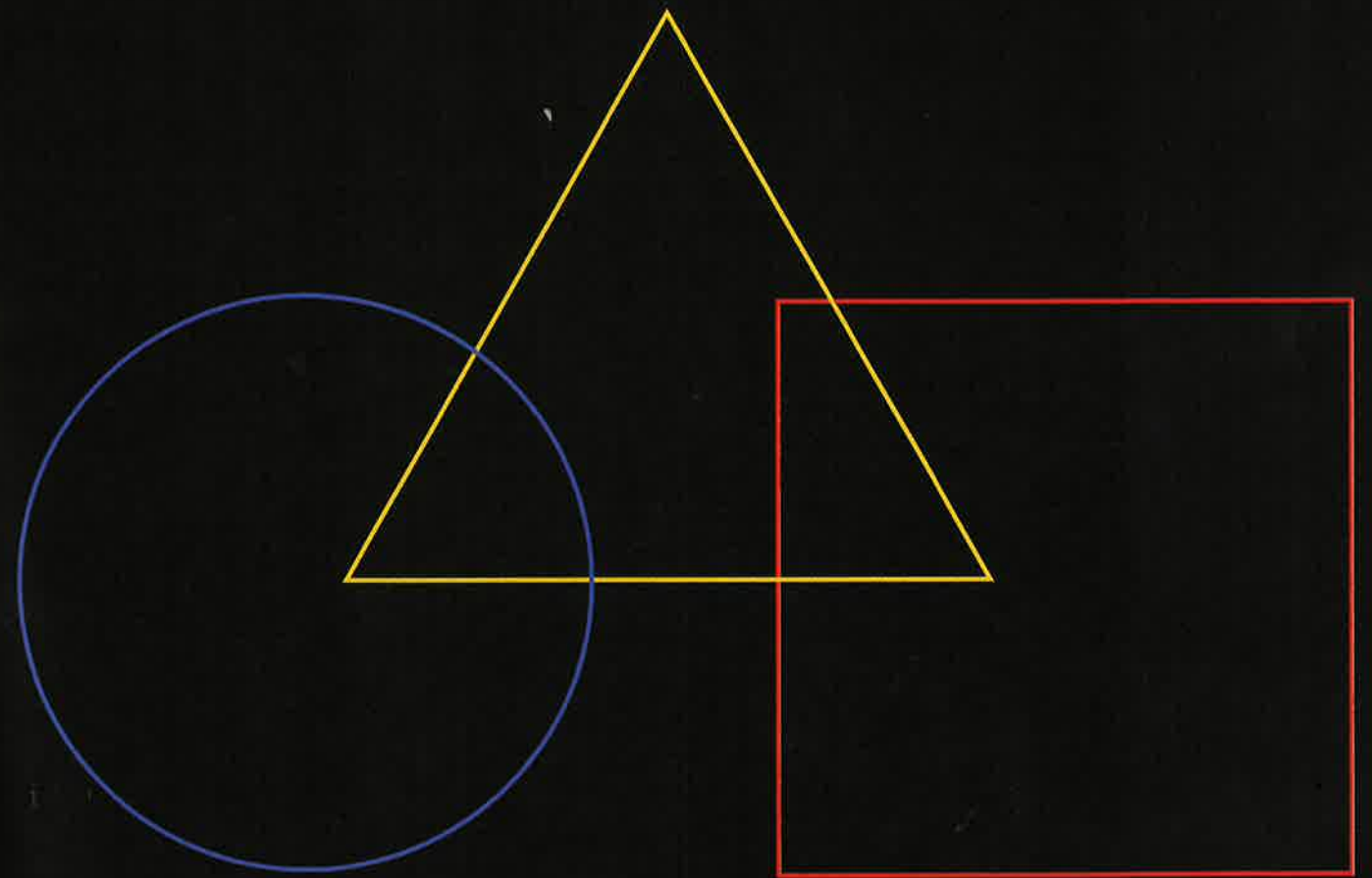


Formal Analysis Toolbox

The elements that comprise a formal reading of art and architecture are inextricably related to materials, techniques and processes and form and style. However, consultation of the following points/questions is designed to help you describe and analyse formal elements of works of art and architecture. An understanding of these formal elements is also essential to respond to and analyse form, style and function, the theme of Chapter 3. Broadly, application of the Toolbox aids a fuller appreciation of all of those works discussed in the themed chapters which follow.



Painting

Materials, Techniques and Processes

The materials, techniques and processes used in a painting help to determine the work's appearance and have an effect on the way we understand and interpret it.

What materials have been used to create the work?

How have the inherent characteristics of the materials been used by the artist (e.g. watercolour's transparency, the quick-drying property of **tempera** that does not allow colour to be blended easily, other than by **hatching**, oil paint's versatility to create translucent layers (**glazes**) to thick **impasto**)?

What is the painting's support (the surface on which the paint is applied)?

Is there evidence of what tools has the painter used?

Have the **medium**, support and/or tools used helped to determine the painting's scale?

Formal Features

- 1 Composition
- 2 Colour
- 3 Pictorial space
- 4 Light and tone
- 5 Form
- 6 Line
- 7 Scale
- 8 Pattern/ornament/decoration

1

Composition

(Relates to the organisation and arrangement of elements in the work into a whole.)

What is the format (portrait or landscape)?

What is the dominant structure of the painting? Where is the focal point? Where are our eyes directed?

Is it formally arranged? Is there a central axis? Is it symmetrical or asymmetrical? Is it balanced? Does it appear random?

Does it use certain shapes (squares, rectangles, pyramids) or forms in a particular manner? What effect does this have? Are any elements repeated or echoed? What effect does this create?

Does the composition create movement? How – using a curvilinear composition (circles) or moving from one side to the other, from top to bottom?

Is it seemingly unstructured? Is it informally arranged? Is it dynamic and exciting? Is it harmonious, well-balanced and rigid?

Has the artist used the **Golden Section**?

Is the image 'open' with elements continuing beyond the frame? Or, is the image 'closed' with elements confined within the frame? Has the image been cropped?

How have the colours been organised?

How does the composition link with the subject matter?

2

Colour

What hues (colours based on wavelengths) are used? Are the hues saturated (the most vivid form of the colour)?

Do the colours show lustre (a brightness that exceeds surface colour), like silk? Are the colours luminous (i.e. brighter than the surrounding visual field), like a flame?

Has the painter used a wide range of colours or a limited palette (range of colours)? Are prismatic colours (colours of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) used?

Are there **primary colours**? Or, have **secondary colours** (orange, green, violet – mixtures of primary colours) been used?

Have **complementary colours** been used?

Are earth colours (e.g. ochre, burnt umber, burnt sienna) used?

Are the colours descriptive (represented as it is seen)? Have the 'natural' colours of the objects been used?

Are the colours warm (e.g. red, orange, yellow) or cool (e.g. green, blue, violet)?

Are shades (a darker **tone**) of one colour used?

Are tints (a lighter tone) of one colour used?

Are tones varying in hue and lightness used?

Are colours used to suggest distance (e.g. become paler/bluer)?

Are colours painted in blocks or blended?

How important is colour in the painting? Is it more important than line? What is its relationship to light (e.g. the Impressionists used colour as light so generally they did not use black)?

How is colour used? Is it used expressively to create a feeling or sensation? Does it create mood? Is it used:

– for psychological effect (blue for emotional coolness/melancholy),

– symbolically (as an established convention – e.g. blue for heaven),

– spiritually (blue for transcendental – e.g. Wassily Kandinsky, Yves Klein),

– for compositional unity,

– to suggest volume or weight,

– atmospherically

– as a means of decoration?

Does the colour create harmony or disharmony?

Is there optical mixing (e.g. as in Neo-impressionism such as paintings by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac)? Are there colour patches (e.g. as in paintings by Paul Cézanne)?

Is it monochrome? If so, to what effect? Do the colours create a sense of calm, excitement, anxiety?

3

Pictorial Space

(The illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat picture plane/surface.)

Is there a convincing sense of depth in the painting (an illusion of real three-dimensional space)? Does the illusion of space look realistic or unrealistic?

Are the objects/figures located in the pictorial space or just piled on top of each other, or flat on the surface?

Do the objects/figures diminish in size to suggest space?

Does the ground plane tilt naturalistically or non-naturalistically?

Is our viewpoint high or low?

Is our viewpoint close or far away? Do we have a narrow view or a panoramic view?

Is the space detached from us or connected to ours?

How do these points relate to the painting's original location?

Has perspective been applied to an individual/object (i.e. **foreshortening** rather than throughout)?

Is there a clear foreground, middle ground and background? Where is the focus? Does the compositional arrangement lead the viewer into the picture?

How is the sense of space achieved?

- Through colour (warm colours recede, cool colours advance)?
- Through the use of light and shade?
- Through overlapping planes?
- Through a winding path that leads the eye?

Has a system of perspective been used? Which system of perspective has been used?

- Mathematical one-point perspective, where lines converge at one point on the horizon to give an illusion of space.
- Mathematical two-point perspective.
- Linear perspective, with diagonal lines reaching into the picture space but not necessarily converging.
- **Atmospheric** (or **aerial**) **perspective** in which colours in a distant landscape fade and forms dissolve with distance (first used by Leonardo da Vinci).

4

Light and Tone

Is the painter's illusion of light used naturalistically?

Is the light source depicted in the painting? Where is it? Is there more than one light source? Are there any shadows cast? Are they cast in a naturalistic way (e.g. in the correct direction)? Is the source natural (e.g. sun, window) or unnatural (e.g. candle)?

Does the light heighten realism? Is it used symbolically? Is light used dramatically (with strong contrasts, of highlights and shadows (i.e. **chiaroscuro**)?

Is shading used to model form? What is highlighted and why?

Are the gradations from light to dark subtle?

Does the light emphasise texture?

Is the effect three-dimensional or flat?

Is light and shade used to create space?

Does light and shade modify colour? Are colours deflected, absorbed, reflected, refracted?

Does light pick out the most important elements of the composition or is symbolism or narrative more important? Does light make details clearer? Does light create mood or atmosphere?

5

Form

(Can be related to light/tone.)

Are the forms convincingly three-dimensional or do flat shapes dominate?

Do the forms of objects or figures have solidity and mass? Do they seem weighty/sculptural?

Has tonal **modelling** been used?

Are the forms soft/curved/hard/angular?

Are forms depicted through shading/outline/colour?

Can the complete form/figure be seen or is it lost in shadow or obliterated by light?

Are forms depicted as naturalistic, realistic, abstracted?

6

Line

Is the image constructed through line?

Do outlines dominate?

Describe the line (e.g. straight, curved or chaotic)?

Does the line contain colour and/or form?

Are forms flat or three-dimensional?

Are the outlines of the figures/objects naturalistic or distorted?

7

Scale

Is the scale of the work itself monumental/ life-size/ miniature?

Is there a **hierarchical scale** within the work in which the most important figures are larger?

How is size and scale related to meaning?

8

Pattern/Ornament/Decoration

Is pattern of primary or secondary importance?

Is pattern created with line or colour?

Is the pattern as a result of materials, techniques and processes? Has the painting incorporated **gold leaf** which has been **tooled**?

Sculpture

(Free-Standing and Relief)
Materials, Techniques and Processes

The materials, techniques and processes used in sculpture help to determine the work's appearance and have an effect on the way we understand and interpret it.

What materials have been used to create the work?

Is it one material or a combination of materials?

Has the work been modelled, carved, or assembled?

How have the inherent characteristics of the materials been used by the sculptor and how have they determined its form (e.g. the limited tensile strength of stone might result in a more compact mass-like work, the **high-tensile** properties of bronze might result in thin/daring projections)?

How has the choice of materials influenced the scale of the work?

How has the choice of materials affected meaning (e.g. has white marble been used to suggest purity? Has bronze been used to suggest strength and nobility)?

Formal Features

- 1 Volume/mass/form
- 2 Composition
- 3 Space
- 4 Scale
- 5 Colour
- 6 Surface/pattern/ornament
- 7 Line/shape

1

Volume/Mass/Form

Is the work free-standing, attached to another surface (perhaps architecture), or in relief?

Is the form solid, massive, weighty?

Are there major and minor forms?

Is the sculpture self-contained (a strong outer, containing shell) or does it invade our space (an inter-penetration of form and environment)?

What is the relationship between the space/void to the mass/form?

Does light and shade come from the volume/mass/form itself or its surface treatment?

Do the forms seem to defy gravity?

2

Composition

Is there one major viewpoint (e.g. the front)?

If free-standing, how does the shape change as you move around it?

Is it simple (single) or complex (multi-figure)?

Is there a central axis?

Is it balanced or top/bottom heavy?

Is it predominantly vertical or horizontal?

Is it based on a particular shape (e.g. pyramid, circle, square)?

Is there a strong diagonal?

Are there any shapes echoed/repeated?

Is there a sense of movement/dynamism or rhythm?

Are there emphatic gestures?

How do forms inter-relate?

Is it highly structured or chaotic?

Is it naturalistic or staged?

3

Space

Is the work free-standing, attached to another surface (perhaps architecture), or in relief?

How does the sculpture relate to the space around it?

Are mass and void inter-related?

Can we walk around or through the work (space engaging the viewer)?

Is it static or moving in space (kinetic)?

4

Scale

Is it life-size, monumental, miniature? How does the scale affect meaning?

Does its large scale elevate its status/power? Does its small scale heighten its vulnerability?

Is it elevated on a plinth or in a niche? Is there a small base which supports a large mass?

Is its scale understood within the context of its location?

Is its scale related to its indoor or outdoor display?

5

Colour

Is the original material coloured (e.g. marble, onyx, granite, mahogany, wood)? Was the material chosen because of its colour?

Has it been coloured, painted, stained, etc?

Is it single-coloured or **polychromatic**?

Is the colour used naturalistically, symbolically, decoratively, or in some other way?

6

Surface/Pattern/Ornament

Is there a dominant pattern of repeated forms and shapes? Is it fundamental to the work's meaning?

Has pattern been created through the form or by surface treatment?

Is pattern used decoratively or to capture light?

Is its purpose decorative, ornamental or symbolic?

What is the treatment of the surface texture? Is it rough or highly polished? Is it in its natural, unworked state or significantly altered? Does the treatment of the surface affect the meaning of the work? Has the surface **patina** been changed?

7

Line/Shape

Is there a clear outline shape/silhouette?

Is line and shape more important than form and mass?

Are the shapes recognisable (e.g. as human or suggestive of a figure)?

Are the shapes flat or abstract?

Are the shapes fixed or do they change (kinetic – i.e. moving parts)?

The Nude Figure

Is the figure naked? Is the figure male/female/gender ambiguous? Is the figure naturalistic? Idealised? Distorted? Expressive?

What are the proportions of the figures, of head to body, and limbs to body?

Is the pose static or animated (**contrapposto**)?

What gestures are used? Are they natural or dramatic?

What are the facial expressions? Are they connecting with the viewer or is their gaze averted, blank?

If part of a multi-figured composition, what's the relationship between the figures?

Is there any drapery? What is its purpose? Does it cover modesty? Does it breathe life, like its wearer? What is the body/drapery relationship? Does it reveal or conceal?

The Clothed Figure

Is their clothing contemporary to the period of the art or not? Does it identify the figures (e.g. wealth/status/occupation)?

Do the clothes reveal or conceal the body?

Do they enhance masculinity or femininity?

Architecture

Materials, Techniques and Processes

The materials, techniques and processes used in architecture help to determine the building's appearance and have an effect on the way we understand and interpret it.

What materials have been used to create the building?

What materials are visible?

Is it one material or a combination of materials?

How do the materials contribute to the building's appearance?

How does the choice of material affect the building's structure?

Is the exterior clad or **rusticated**, rendered, pebble-dashed?

Are the materials **vernacular**?

Is the building style vernacular or derived from vernacular styles?

Have the materials been selected for their functional properties more than their aesthetic qualities?

Formal Features

1 **Structure/form**

2 **Volume/mass**

3 **Architectural elements**

4 **Composition**

5 **Site/location**

6 **Scale**

7 **Colour**

8 **Pattern/ornament/decoration**

1

Structure/Form

How is it constructed (how does it stay up)? Is it a load-bearing construction (e.g. with solid walls) or a skeletal (frame) construction (e.g. **curtain wall**)? Does it look **prefabricated**?

Is it a **trabeated** construction? Are the columns load-bearing or decorative? Is it arcuated (arch-based) architecture? Are there any vaults?

Is there a dome?

Is there buttressing?

How many storeys are there?

What is the relationship between the structure and the decoration?

Are there smaller structures within the main structure (e.g. an **aedicule**)?

2

Volume/Mass

Is the building symmetrical or asymmetrical?

Are there recessions and projections? Are spaces based on squares or another shape? Is the space contained/constricted by a roof?

Is the building based on solids and voids?

Is it airy or claustrophobic?

3

Architectural Elements

Has the classical language of architecture been used (e.g. dome, **columns**, **pediment**)?

Are there features associated with castles (e.g. turrets)? Or features associated with churches (e.g. spires)?

How many architectural elements can you identify?

4

Composition

Is there a single mass or an arrangement of parts?

Is the building symmetrical or asymmetrical? Is there a formal or informal arrangement? A regular or irregular arrangement?

Is it a unified design or did it develop over time?

Is there an obvious entrance?

Is the **façade** balanced horizontally? Vertically?

Are a set of proportions used (e.g. the Classical Orders, or Golden Section)?

How is the building articulated (how do the parts relate to one another)? Is it divided into bays? Are some recessed or projected?

Are elements repeated for rhythm? What effect does spacing have on the composition (e.g. intercolumniation)?

Is there interplay between curved and straight elements?

Does the exterior suggest the arrangement of the interior (e.g. a number of storeys, chimneys, tall windows)?

What is the arrangement of the windows (fenestration)? What sort of windows are there – dormer, rose, etc. Are they large in relation to the wall mass? Are they pedimented?

Does the building suggest movement? In what direction and using what elements (**volute**s, solids/voids, undulation)?

5

Site/Location

Is it rural or urban? Look at the surrounding buildings; is it part of a complex? Does it stand out?

Is there a main façade? Is there a processional approach to add grandeur? Are the gardens landscaped/formal?

Does the structure have a relationship with its surrounding space/environment?

How does the site affect our interpretation of the building?

6

Scale

What has determined the building's scale?

Is it a monumental scale or a private domestic space?

How does its scale relate to its function?

How does it impact on the viewer?

7

Colour

What colour are the materials? Does the colour affect our interpretation of the building or help define its style (e.g. white-painted concrete is synonymous with the International Modern Movement)?

Is colour used for decoration?

Have materials been used in their natural state/colour or have they been altered/painted?

8

Pattern/Ornament/Decoration

Are the features of the building standardised (e.g. classical language, Gothic) or individualised?

Are features decorative, structural or both (e.g. the use of caryatids)?

Are features hand crafted or mass produced? How does this affect the style (appearance) of the building? Is the decoration associated with a particular style (e.g. a hand-crafted building may appear vernacular and individual such as the Arts and Crafts style).

Has the material been used decoratively (e.g. **herringbone brickwork**, **rustication**)? What affect does this have?

Is the decoration coherent or eclectic?

Works Consulted

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Other Useful Sources

Acton, M. *Learning to Look at Painting*, Routledge, 2007. This is an excellent source of detailed discussion on the following formal elements: composition, space, form, tone and colour.

Pooke, G. and Whitham, G. *Understand Art History*, Hodder, 2010. This book explains the various meanings of formalism and examines the different art periods and styles using easy-to-understand illustrations and well-known examples.