

## ART HISTORY METHODS

Professor Flanigan

### Analytic Thinking – various levels of analysis

- i. formal analysis – What does it look like? How is it composed?  
-this is not a mere description, but rather an analysis of formal compositional elements (space, line, form, color, figure style, etc.)
- ii. technical analysis – How was it made? What is its condition?  
-this is an analysis of materials, production technique and may address preservation, conservation, and restoration
- iii. interpretation – Why was it made? For what purpose (function / meaning)?

### Critical Thinking

- analyzing, questioning, or comparing the interpretations of others or re-evaluating the evidence presented by others
- may also include viewing the work from another point of view or through a particular theoretical lens

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## WRITING ABOUT ART

### Levels of Art Historical Writing (may be combined)

- Description --- What does it look like?
  - Requires: looking skills, descriptive writing skills, art historical vocabulary
- Analysis --- Why does it look this way? How is it made? How is it composed? What style is it and why?
  - Additional Requirements: understanding of formal & technical properties, analytical thinking skills
- Interpretation --- What does it mean?
  - Additional Requirements: understanding of social and historical context, critical thinking skills, methods of critical inquiry or theory
- Criticism --- Making value judgments about the work often based on evaluation of historical significance, aesthetic merit or inherent worth. Is it a good, successful, or innovative work?

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### TYPES OF ART HISTORICAL WRITING (may be combined)

- Description
- Formal or Stylistic Analysis
- Comparison – focuses on the similarities and differences between two or more works in order to come to conclusions about their relationship to each other
- Exhibition Catalog Entry – involves description and state of research on that work
- Review of an Exhibition – involves criticism
- Review of a Book or Article (or comparative review of multiple books or articles) – involves criticism and knowledge of recent research and related publications

- Research Paper / Article / Essay / Book – usually has a thesis or argues a point based on evidence acquired through research (examination of written documents, study of social context, scientific examination, etc.) and / or the application of a new interpretation

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## **APPROACHES TO ART HISTORY**

### **“Traditional” Approaches to Art History**

Cataloguing and Description – description of what the work looks like without much further analysis

Formal, Visual or Stylistic Analysis – study of the formal properties of a work of art (i.e. composition, line, color, form, etc.) and their relation to characteristics of a particular period style

Technical Analysis – study of the materials and techniques used to produce a work of art, its conservation, and restoration

Connoisseurship – focus on the attribution and dating of works of art based on analysis of style and the “hand” of the artist

\* Iconographic, Iconological or Semiotic Analysis – study of the meaning of a work of art through an interpretation of its visual symbols (iconography) or its relation to literary sources (iconology)

\* Biographical and Psychological Analysis (influenced by Vasari and Freud) – focus on the biography of the artist and how the work reflects the artist’s personal history or personality

\* = approaches that interpret meaning

### **“New” History of Art / Critical Approaches (began 1960s, influenced by Marxism)**

– interpretation based on the social context of the artwork or the values it embodies, art is no longer seen as neutral object (application of social and critical theory)

Scholars began to consider:

- Social or economic conditions for the production of art (Marxism, cultural materialism)
- Circulation of works of art (art markets, patterns of influence, etc.)
- Reception by different audiences
- Ideological values (especially related to power and class)
- Feminism and gender studies (female patrons, reception by female viewer, construction of gender and sexuality, queer studies, etc.)
- Social history - use of art to reflect social class and construct identity
- Cultural and ethnic history (depictions of the “other,” postcolonial studies)

\*\* Scholars often employ multiple approaches at once. For example, a good study of the reception of a work of art may start with a through description and formal analysis of the work.