

SUPPORTING MULTIMODAL LITERACY: SUPPLEMENT 9

Visual Art Elements and Analysis Questions

Visual art is typically discussed in terms of seven main elements and other principles that build on those elements. There are also a number of other terms that are useful when describing and analyzing art. Below you will find a list of the visual art elements and principles as well as some other useful terms followed with a few questions to guide your visual art analysis.

Visual Art Elements and Principles:

Line - Any line found within any artwork, such as a line that defines the edge of a figure or the horizon line or even a curved line implied by a sculpture. Line can be described according to its quality—is it long and fluid or a short jagged line or cross hatched?

Shape – Any shape found within the artwork, either implied or explicit. This can be an abstract shape found within a painting or sculpture or the shape made by a woman’s dress. Shapes can be defined as being abstract, geometric, and/or organic.

Color – Color includes elements of hue, value, and intensity. The hue is the name of the color, the value is its lightness or darkness, and the intensity is its level of brightness and/or purity or dullness and/or muddiness.

Texture – The texture of an artwork can be explicit, in terms of how it actually feels, such as in a steel sculpture, or implicit, in terms of how it might feel if you were to touch it, such as the fur on an animal in an illustration.

Form – Form includes any aspect of art that suggests or has volume, such as a cube or sphere or organic shape. Form can be implied by certain aspects of shading or the use of shadows or can be an actual three-dimensional piece.

Value – Value refers to the lightness or darkness of the tones or colors in a piece. This element overlaps with color to some extent but is generally used to reference the overall work rather than smaller aspects of it.

Space – Space can include actual space, such as in an installation or sculpture, or the space implied inside a two-dimensional work, such as the illusion of a landscape or the flat space of an abstract painting.

Composition – The arrangement all aspects within the work. Key terms include symmetrical/asymmetrical, balanced/imbanced, static/dynamic.

Media/Medium – The material used to create the piece. Media includes both traditional (e.g. paint, steel) and non-traditional (e.g. found textiles or natural items, such as leaves).

Repetition/Rhythm – Any aspect of a work that is repeated or the creates a noticeable pattern.

Movement – The allusion to movement (e.g. an animal running), actual movement (e.g. a pendulum swinging) or implied movement (the direction your eye follows in a composition). This might also reference editing or camera work in a video piece (for more elements related to film see Supplement 10: Television/Film/Video Analysis Questions)

Other Useful Terms for Visual Analysis

Context – Any information regarding the creation of the piece, including facts about the time period, historical or social issues, the artist, the place it was created, etc.

Genre – There are numerous genres, or types, of art that each follow certain conventions. Some of these genres were particular to their time and place, such as Russian religious icons, and some occur at different times, such as figurative and landscape painting—though certain times and places might narrow such categories to more specific genre conventions, such as Italian Mannerist figurative painting. Some genres fall into both categories: for example, Impressionism was a certain genre of painting, but some painters still use an impressionistic style.

Intentional Fallacy – The belief that what the artist intended is what the piece should mean. Though intention can be considered part of the context, analysis of visual art focuses on a reader response model—or what a viewer takes away from a piece—rather than what the artist intended.

Institutional Theory – This theory asserts that any art deemed relevant by the main art institutions (including museums, galleries, and critics) is considered art. The question “is this art?” is, therefore, often bypassed when analyzing art that has been vetted by the institution.

Questions to Guide Analysis of Visual Art

- What initial reactions do you have to the work of art? Does it evoke a certain mood or feeling? What about the image causes this reaction?
- When was this created and by whom? Did the visual art serve a purpose in its time and place?
- Does knowing more about the context affect your viewpoint on the work? How so?
- What media did the artist use and how does that affect the way the content is depicted?
- Is this artwork part of a particular genre (graffiti art, figurative portrait, pop sculpture). How does it meet or challenge the expectations of the genre?
- Is the image realistic or abstract? Why do you think that the artist chose this way to express their ideas? How does this choice affect your understanding of the content?
- What are the key visual art elements or principles that are present in this image (see the list above)? Is it reliant on one element or principle more than another?
- What mood or tone is created by the use of visual elements and principles?
- What kind of relationship is there between objects or elements in the artwork? How do visual art elements and principles highlight these relationships?
- What content or subject matter does this artwork reference? How does it address this content?
- What underlying message does the piece seem to send about its content based on the formal choices made (.i.e. how does the use of visual art elements and principles relate to the content?)?
- (*If evaluating or reviewing the work*) What aspects of the piece are more or less successful based on the purpose of the piece or the criteria expected for the genre (e.g. public art should engage a general public, realistic art should accurately capture reality, etc.)?