**Analyzing Works of Art**

When analyzing works of art, students must think critically about form, content, context, and function.

**1. Form:**

**Form** describes component materials and how they are employed to create physical and visual elements that coalesce into a work of art. Form is investigated by applying design elements and principles to analyze the work’s fundamental visual components and their relationship to work in its entirety.

**Formal Elements:  (Line, Color, Composition, Space, Texture)**

***Line****: horizontal, vertical, diagonal, or curved lines?*

***Shape****: height, width, geometric, or organic?*

***Space****: positive, negative, or three-dimensional?*

***Color****: hue, value (light or dark), or intensity (dull, bright, warm, or cool)?*

***Texture****: two dimensional or surface texture?*

Of what is the work formed?

With what materials was it manufactured into a work of art?

Examples: oil on canvas; hand carved from cedar wood; partially carved into a sandstone rock cliff; woodcut and letterpress; silkscreened; watercolor, gold and ink on paper; stone masonry and marble with inlay of precious and semiprecious stones; etc.

**2. Function:**

**Function** includes the artist’s intended use(s) of the work, which may change according to the context of audience, time, location, and culture. Functions may be for utility, intercession, decoration, communication, and commemoration and may be spiritual, social, political, and/or personally expressive.

* Why did the artist create the work?
* What purpose does the work serve?
* *For religious worship?*
* *To entertain or please the eye?*
* *To tell a story?*
* *As a form of scientific study?*
* For what was it initially used?
* *Where did the artist originally intend to place the work?*
* *Made for a competitive exhibition?*
* How does it work?

Examples:  The building served as mausoleum housing the ashes of the deceased.

Viewers of the painting were instructed in the follies of false love.

The sculpture represents the power, glory and divinity of the emperor.

The woodcut impressed upon the viewers the importance of a personal relationship with their god.

**3. Content:**

**Content** of a work of art consists of interacting, communicative elements of design, representation, and presentation within a work of art. Content includes subject matter: visible imagery that may be formal depictions (e.g., minimalist or nonobjective works), representative depictions (e.g., portraiture and landscape), and/or symbolic depictions (e.g., emblems and logos). Content may be narrative, symbolic, spiritual, historical, mythological, supernatural, and/or propagandistic (e.g., satirical and/or protest oriented).

* ***Subject****: what/who does the work depict?*

*Exactly what does the viewer see in the work of art?*

* ***Iconography****: what do the figures and objects in the work represent?*

*Who are the figures?*

* ***Narration****: what event or series of events does the artist present?*

*Is there more to the work than is initially seen?*

Examples: The Virgin Mary appears to be falling away from the dead body of the martyred Christ figure.

The pediment contains sculptures representing the birth of the patron goddess.

There is a discernible void in the middle of the painting.

There are six chandeliers with no lights. The only light emanates from an unseen source.

**4. Context:**

**Context** includes original and subsequent historical and cultural milieu of a work of art. Context includes information about the time, place, and culture in which a work of art was created, as well as information about when, where, and how subsequent audiences interacted with the work. The artist’s intended purpose for a work of art is contextual information, as is the chosen site for the work (which may be public or private), as well as subsequent locations of the work. Modes of display of work of art can include associated paraphernalia (e.g., ceremonial objects and attire) and multisensory stimuli (e.g., scent and sound). Characteristics of the artist and audience – including aesthetic, intellectual, religious, political, social, and economic characteristics – are context. Patronage, ownership of a work of art, and other power relationships are also aspects of context. Contextual information includes audience response to a work of art. Contextual information ma be provided through records, reports, religious chronicles, personal reflections, manifestos, academic publications, mass media, sociological data, cultural studies, geographic data, artifacts, narrative and/or performance (e.g., oral, written, poetry, music, dance, dramatic productions), documentations, archaeology, and research.

* ***Artist****: Who created the work?*

*What is/was the artist’s status in the culture?*

*What else is known about this artist?*

* ***Culture****: When was the work created?*

*Where was the work produced?*

*Religious beliefs? Political or philosophical ideologies?*

* ***Impact****: Inspire or influence other artists?*

*Seen by a large number of people?*

*Cause controversy? Alter fashion or taste?*

Why was the artwork created and what did it mean to the people who viewed it at the time it was created?

Is there a patron?

Do certain figures symbolically represent ideas?

Was the work didactic and how was it didactic?

Examples:  Viewers at the time would automatically recognize the figure on the left as Venus since she holds a golden apple in her outstretched hand.

The thirteen rods represent the original thirteen colonies, while the binding represents their unified revolt against the tyranny of King George III.

**5. Meaning:**

Most of the time, meaning is identical to function. However, there may be more subtlety    to understanding the work that goes beyond its function.

Example: Though the building serves as a place for people to worship their god, the actual meaning of the name is, “House of the Virgin.”

The book contains daily prayers to be recited, but the meaning is clearly to show the wealth of the patron.