

A Guide to Viewing (and Better Understanding) Painting

by

Dr. Maria Carlson
Professor Emerita of Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Kansas

SUBJECT:

What is the title of the work?

What is the work about (on the surface?)

Does the work purport to depict an specific individual, a scene, or an event from the past?

If so, who was the person (or what transpired in the event/story?)

Why might the artist have selected that particular subject?

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT:

Who is the artist?

When and where did he or she paint the work in question?

With what style or school was the artist typically associated?

With what other works is it in conversation?

What cultural or historical matters may have influenced it?

What cultural or historical matters does it seem to be addressing?

COMPOSITION: (formal elements)

Medium [Oil based, watercolors, collage, etc.]

Why is the artist using this particular medium?

What are its advantages? Its limitations?

Lines

Are the lines thick or thin?

Largely vertical or horizontal?

Straight or curved?
What is achieved by this particular use of line?

Color

Is the color realistic or expressive?
Warm or cool?
Bright or muted?
And to what effect?

Light

How is light used?
How is shadow used?
Is there any play between the two?
What is communicated to the viewer?

Perspective

Where is the “center” of the art work?
To what point on the canvas is your eye drawn when you gaze at the painting?
Are the elements surrounding that point depicted in “naturalistic” fashion?

Space

What is the sense of space in the work you’ve chosen?
Is there great depth, or is the visual plane shallow?
How are the elements of the work configured in that space?
How does the sense of space affect the subject matter?
Affect your response to the work?

Composition

How do the various formal elements of the work interact?
How does the composition convey the work’s theme or idea?
How does the eye move across the piece?
How does the composition control that movement?

Style

What elements of the composition work to constitute the artist’s style?
The style of the period in which the artist was/is working?

THEMATICS:

Who was the artist’s principal audience?

What message(s) do you believe the artist wanted to communicate to that audience?

To what degree do you believe the artist was successful