

Visual analysis is the practice of looking closely at an artwork to understand its effects and possible meanings. It is an essential skill for writing persuasively about art and forms the basis of many assessments at NAS. The easiest way to develop your skills of visual analysis is to remember the priorities of art history, which can be reduced to a simple formula:

- Subject
- Form
- Historical context

You can apply this formula to artworks you are studying for essays, exams, and presentations and it's a good way to generate ideas that may help you develop a thesis.

Let's break down each component of the formula.

### Subject

This is what the artist or workshop has set out to depict. The subject matter often corresponds with the original location of the artwork, which might be a temple, a palace, an institution, or a domestic setting. It may have been chosen by a patron (or patrons) who commissioned the artwork (paid for it and stipulated the cost).

Subject matter often falls into specific genres, such as:

- Historical subject matter (generally derived from a text. Sources include sacred texts, poems, recorded historical events)
- Portraiture (representations of people who were living at the time)
- Landscape (representations of natural scenery, sometimes a specific place, sometimes an imagined one, at particular seasons and times of day)
- Everyday life (anonymous, but recognisable figures engaged in familiar activities)
- Still life (precious or mundane objects arranged in an interior setting)

### Form

Looking closely at the artwork, try to determine *how* the subject is represented, considering the artistic choices made by the artist or workshop. Think about the *impact* that these choices have on the way the artwork communicates with the viewer, its mood or emotional qualities, or its overall effect. Consider the following:

- Choice of medium and materials (oil paint, tempera, fresco, ink on paper, ink on silk, marble, bronze, clay, engraving, etching, aquatint)
- Technique (smooth or rough? Linear or painterly? Expressive or detached?)

- Scale (large or small relative to the viewer? Grandiose and monumental, or personal and intimate?)
- Relationship between the artwork and viewer (playful and imaginative, heroic and edifying, moralising and didactic, or intellectual and analytical? Are we to admire and learn, or participate emotionally or psychologically?)
- Composition (Orderly or dynamic? Symmetrical or asymmetrical? Sparse or crowded? Open or closed? How are directional lines used to draw your attention? How are things grouped?)
- Colour (bright, clear, pure, rich, dark, brooding, dull? Naturalistic or symbolic?)
- Light (contrasting or diffuse, clear or atmospheric? Is there an identifiable light source?)
- Gaze and gesture (how do sightlines or actions draw your attention to aspects of the work? What are the points of focus?)
- Space (abstract, shallow, schematic, perspectival, or deep?)

### Historical context

You can deepen your knowledge or interpretation of an artwork by considering how it relates to social, cultural, political, or religious ideas that were current at the time it was made. Ask yourself how the original viewers responded to or used the artwork, or how it conveys the expectations and functions of art in its era. For example:

- The dramatic intensity of Caravaggio's altarpieces can be related to the Counter Reformation
- Chojiro's raku ware tea bowl can be related to Sen no Rikyu's development of the rustic style of tea ceremony
- The precision of Mary Delaney's paper collages can be related to Enlightenment empiricism
- The themes of isolation and disorientation in Bada Shanren's work can be related to the Manchu overthrow of the Ming dynasty
- The naturalism of Giotto's frescoes can be related to the rise of Franciscanism
- Guo Xi's representation of mountains can be related to Confucian moral philosophy
- Donatello's nude, bronze statue of David can be related to the revival of classical ideas in fifteenth-century Florence

Though valid on their own, these statements must be explained through scholarly research and visual evidence from the artwork. Form and context are always integrated in effective writing about art.

### Useful resources:

Anne D'Alleva. *How to write art history*. London: Laurence King, 2006

Amy Tucker, *Visual literacy: writing about art*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002

Extra academic English support: <https://nationalartschool.simplybook.me>