



Abteilung Kunstgeschichte Ostasiens

Object Analysis

Guidelines for writing an object analysis (Objektbeschreibung)

An object analysis is an exercise in observation and writing, and involves a concentrated visual analysis of an art object, that (in most cases) you see first-hand as opposed to in a photographic reproduction.

This is more than a simple description: you are working to convey a distinctive visual character of an artwork. Straightforward though it may seem, putting visual impressions into words is a subtle and demanding activity.

Start preparing your paper well in advance. In some cases you will be instructed to select an object in the museum, in other cases a viewing will be arranged for the class. If you are free to choose an object from the museum, be sure to plan a visit well in advance of your deadline. Sometimes a second visit might be helpful to confirm or re-evaluate your initial impressions. You should take a camera with you, but please always check and follow rules regarding photography in the museum. If you wait until the last moment to write, you might find the museum closed or might have to fight a crowd to study your chosen piece. You should also plan sufficient time to visit the library to research your object and its contexts.

General guidelines

The length of your paper should be 3-4 pages, excluding the title page, images and bibliography. In all other aspects, please follow the Guidelines for academic writing in East Asian Art History.

Please remember to provide at least one image of your chosen object. Ideally (and whenever possible), images of the object from various angles should be included so that the grader can properly evaluate your work. As with all images in papers, these should be labelled correctly.

Your paper should consist of the following three parts:

1. A short description of where you found your object
2. A formal analysis of your object
3. Further analysis

1. A short description of where you found your object

This should only be, at most, a brief one-paragraph description of the place you found your object. If you found it in a museum, then note title, artist (or “anonymous”), and the accession number. If you found it in a book, provide the proper bibliographical details in a footnote. If you found it on the Internet, be sure to supply the web address in a footnote. As always, be sure to footnote your sources.

2. Formal analysis

“Formal analysis” refers to the analysis of form (not to the opposite of “informal” analysis). Its purpose is to examine a work carefully and to find suitable words with which to articulate its appearance.

Please note that a formal analysis does not deal with such things as the culture in which a work was produced, its artist, its meaning, its function, its value, its patronage, etc. (Save all these for the third section!) Even subject matter – such as a narrative or the meaning of a character – should not be dwelt upon. Your analysis is to be of the physical object and the decisions that shaped it. While this invites you to make some judgments about its effects – for example, about tranquil rhythms, or an agitated contour, or perhaps a contemplative mood – avoid writing about entirely subjective responses (such as elaborate associations, projections, or memories) that might arise for you. Throughout your paper, be specific about your observations. If you call an object “realistic” or “soft” or “confrontational,” explain how this is achieved. You should write clearly and think about how to best organize your thoughts within the paper.

The formal analysis requires no research beyond your own thoughtful study of the object.

Begin by noting salient characteristics, including the medium (e.g. porcelain, wood, paper, metal, etc.) and size. For objects viewed in the museum, you will often find exact measurements of an object on a museum’s plate or in an exhibition catalogue. Where a special viewing has been organised with the curator, it may be possible to measure the object yourself, so bring a tape measure or measuring stick to have on hand.

Then analyse the object carefully, noting the basic subject matter and the ways in which the artist has approached it. Your analysis should emphasize those elements or qualities that seem to define the object most essentially. Different works will invite different emphases, but you may want to discuss such things as:

Medium: What is your object? Describe the material.

Technique: If ceramic, is the object turned on a potter’s wheel? How can you tell? How is the material manipulated into producing certain effects (e.g. roundness, textures, light and darkness, weight, rhythms, etc.)? What kind of tools might have been used in producing your object? If made of other material, then you might have to ask other questions.

Composition: How has the artist “arranged” the work? How would you characterize the relationships between figures, objects, places, or between such elements and the overall shape or structure of the work? Is the work composed in a way that suggests a single point of view? Does it seem to invite particular kinds of attention or approach from a viewer?

Scale: Does the size of the work shape its effect or meaning? Is the scale of figures or other elements especially notable? Do the differences in proportions among elements contribute to a certain effect?

Decoration: Is there some kind of line-drawn decoration on the object? What can you say about the decoration: its colour, form, pattern, rhythm, etc.: is one or more of these elements of representation used for particular results? Are there noteworthy relationships between the shape and size of the

object and the decoration depicted within it? Do depicted surfaces evoke one's sense of light, touch, etc. in some distinctive way? If lines are used, are they uniformly thick and continuous or varied and broken? Is there a sense of movement? Is space represented or implied? If there are patterns or decorative elements, where are they placed and how do they contribute to the effect? Does the artist use different kinds of lines and why?

Condition: Does the object seem to be damaged or repaired? Are there burn marks or watermarks? Does the size of the object seem different than the original shape (e.g. parts are broken off)? Are there any additions (e.g. of metal or other materials)? How might the present condition seem different than the original condition, and what does that tell us about the artist's intentions and our present-day perception of the object?

Shape, line, space, colour, texture, etc.: Are one or more of these elements of representation handled for particular results? Are there noteworthy relationships between the surface of the object and its overall contour? Do actual or depicted surfaces evoke one's sense of light, touch, etc. in some distinctive way? Is space represented or implied? If there are patterns or decorative elements, where are they placed and how do they contribute to the effect?

For those who want to read more about approaches to writing about art (including formal analysis), some brief and useful introductions are:

- Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. New York: Longman, 2002.
Saye, Henry. *Writing About Art*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009.
Prochno, Renato. *Das Studium der Kunstgeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2008.

3. Further analysis

With the formal analysis completed in the previous section, you may now consider many of your observations and begin asking yourself "why?". Whereas in the formal analysis the focus lay on description, in the further analysis you should begin to interpret and explain these findings.

This is the section in which you can include biographical information if the work was made by an identified artist, and discuss if/how it relates to the physical appearance of the work. You may also think about larger questions such as the historical and material culture background of the work and its production, its cultural meaning, the function of the work, its ritual use, and so on. Look at the texts you have been reading for the class and consider whether they relate to this object. What historical period does the work come from and what particular aspects of that age are reflected in this work? How is the work related to mortuary culture? Is there a religious significance in the work? The list of possible questions you could bring to the print is quite long.

In this section you may also bring in other (comparison) pieces, secondary literature, and theoretical works – such as Plato, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Wu Hung, or Yoko Ono. A good place to start may also be to look at past catalogues featuring objects of the type you are studying and to critically examine what is written about pieces similar to yours. You can then agree or disagree, explaining why.

Citations and style

Please consult the "Guidelines for academic writing in East Asian Art History"
http://www.khist.uzh.ch/chairs/ostasien/Studium/leitfaden/KGOA_GuidlinesAcademicWriting_7Sept2015.pdf

These style guidelines are obligatory for all written assignments submitted in our department.

Using general nouns

Be attentive when using words such as "beauty" and "perfection." Not only are these terms too general, but also they are also subjective (your version of beauty may vary from another person's version of beauty).

A good rule of thumb is to be specific with your descriptions and to define your terms. For example, if you did want to discuss the "beauty" of an object, you would first need to define the standards of beauty that you are using, and describe specifically how and where this is happening in the object such that it would lead you to think that it is representative of a specific notion of "beauty."

Using general descriptors

Words like "different" and "interesting" have become so overused that they now cease to carry any real meaning. Rather than saying that something is interesting, it would be more useful to explain what specifically makes it "interesting."

Generalizing cultures

There are many different styles and forms that appear throughout the history of Chinese art, which vary not only through time but also according to place. Similarly, the notions of a "Western culture" or "Western values" are very problematic. Rather than over-generalizing the cultures of these areas, it is better to be specific about the area, the community, the aspects of form, etc....to which you are referring.

Images

Make sure to include images with your analysis. Please refer to the KGOA Guidelines for rules related to images labelling and referencing.

Pagination

In all papers you hand in, please be sure to number your pages.