

Image Annotation & Analysis

Art and Composite Culture in South Asian History

This exercise uses deep observation and analysis of visual works and other physical objects in order to deepen your understanding of past societies.

Preparation

Review the *Elements of Art and Principles of Design* handout. You'll use this specialized vocabulary to describe what you're seeing.

Observation Questions

Answer these questions by looking at the artwork/object. Describe what you see without interpreting its meaning.

- For example: I see a person with a beard with an open mouth and lowered eyebrows, reaching out an arm toward another person.
- NOT: I see a person *angrily* talking to someone else.

1. What can you tell about the artwork/object by using your five senses?
 - a. How does it look? Consider line and shape (two-dimensional), form (three-dimensional), color (hue, light, dark), and texture (reflective, matte), among other characteristics.
 - b. How might it feel if you could touch it? Consider form and shape (round, angular), texture (smooth, rough), temperature (cold, warm), and density (hard, soft), among other characteristics.
 - c. How might it sound? Does sound play a role in understanding the artwork? Consider what sounds the object makes when manipulated.
 - d. How might it smell? Can you describe the smell by comparing it to other objects or places? Does smell play a role in understanding the artwork?
 - e. How might it taste (if appropriate)? Is this something that is meant to be consumed? Or, does it depict something being consumed?
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2. What do you see in this artwork/object?
 - a. Are there any recognizable objects, places, or scenes? How are these presented?
 - b. Have people been included?
 - i. What can we tell about them (i.e. identity; age; attire; profession; cultural connections; family relationships; wealth; mood/expression)?
 - ii. What can we learn from their pose (i.e. frontal; profile; partly turned; body language)?
 - iii. Where are they looking (i.e. direct eye contact with viewer; downcast; interested in other subjects within the artwork)?
 - iv. Can we work out relationships between figures from the way they are posed?
 - c. What important details are included (drapery; costumes; adornment; architectural elements; emblems; logos; motifs)?
 - i. How do aspects of setting support the primary subject?
 - ii. What is the effect of including these items within the arrangement?
3. What are the artwork/object's physical properties?
 - a. What material(s) is the object made from? Animal, vegetable, mineral, synthetic?
 - b. How big is the object? Consider its length, width, depth, volume. Compare it to the size of your hand.
 - c. How heavy is the object? Is it heavier or lighter than you expected?
 - d. How many parts does the object have and how are they arranged? Are they symmetrical, asymmetrical, distinct, merged?
 - e. Does it have any inscriptions or decorations on it? Is it printed, stamped, engraved?
 - f. What might a person with specialized knowledge or special equipment be able to learn about this object's physical properties? (e.g. What if you could x-ray the object or study its chemical composition?)
4. How is the artwork/object oriented?
 - a. Is it unidirectional? (i.e. only viewed from/works/moves in a single direction?)



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- b. Does it have a presumed front, back, bottom, or top? How can you tell?
- c. Does it have open and closed parts? If, for example, it appears to have a "handle" or a "lid," how do you know?

Interpretive Questions

Use your observations as evidence to support your interpretations.

- 5. (If the artwork depicts a scene) What is happening in this scene? What makes you say that?
- 6. What is the artwork/object's purpose? Why do you think this?
- 7. What is your emotional response to the artwork/object?
 - a. Why did the object cause this response? Are you responding to the object itself, or to things the object makes you think about?
 - b. How do you think others might respond to this object? Why?

Research Questions

First, see what you can infer by closely examining the artwork/object. Then, do research to find out what scholars have learned from/about this artwork/object.

- 8. How was the artwork/object produced?
 - a. What techniques were used to produce the object? What tools and skills did the maker(s) of this object use in making it?
 - b. What social structures supported the making of this object?
- 9. Who made the artwork/object, and under what circumstances?
 - a. Was it made by one person or multiple people?
 - b. Was the maker also the designer?
 - c. When was it made? How do you think a researcher might answer this question?
 - d. Where was it made?
 - e. Do you think it was made specifically for one person? Or for one kind of person? Why?
- 10. What is the artwork/object's history?
 - a. Who owned it? Who used it? Were the owner(s) and the user(s) the same persons?
 - b. When did each owner possess the object? How did it pass from hand to hand?



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- c. Where did the object originate? (Where) did it travel?
11. Is the artwork/object part of a group of artworks/objects? If so, how is it related to the other objects?
- Is it part of a genre? If so, what features does it share with other objects of its genre?
 - What is its spatial relationship to other objects in its group?
 - Does it have a metaphorical relationship to other objects? If so, how?
 - Is it part of a collection, whether personal or institutional?
12. How does, or did, possession of the artwork/object relate to individual and/or group identity? Consider class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nation, religion, etc.
13. Does the artwork/object relate to a set (or sets) of beliefs (e.g., spiritual, ideological)? If so, how?
14. Is the artwork/object part of a system (or systems) of exchange (e.g., commodity, gift)? If so, how?
15. What is special or distinctive about the object?

Sources:

The questions here are drawn from two sources: (1) Twenty Questions to Ask an Object (<https://youtu.be/mPSeQF3OF1Q>) and (2) The Student Art Guide (<https://www.studentartguide.com/articles/how-to-analyze-an-artwork>). We have combined/added/removed/modified questions.



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