

VISUAL ANALYSIS 101

This document offers a detailed explanation and walk-through of visual analysis. The PDF includes:

- **WORKSHEET FOR INSTRUCTORS:** tailored explanation of visual analysis and teaching tips
- **WALK-THROUGH OF VISUAL ANALYSIS:** demonstration of visual analysis for instructors, but can be edited and shared with students
- **WORKSHEET FOR STUDENTS:** tailored explanation of visual analysis and prompts
- **FURTHER INFORMATION FOR INSTRUCTORS:** a list of online and other resources on visual analysis and visual literacy

WORKSHEET FOR INSTRUCTORS

What is visual analysis?

Visual analysis is a method of understanding art that focuses on an artwork's visual elements, such as color, line, texture, and scale. In its strictest definition, it is a description and explanation of visual structure for its own sake. Yet the purpose of visual analysis can also recognize the choices that an artist made in creating the artwork, as well as to better understand how the formal properties of an artwork communicate ideas, content, or meaning. Visual analysis is often used as a starting point for art-historical writing.

Visual analysis is not just for art. It is also a critical part of visual literacy, a skill that helps people read and critically interpret images, whether in a museum, on social media, in entertainment, advertising, or the news. As citizens of the 21st century, we are constantly confronted with visual media. Practicing visual analysis sharpens critical judgment skills and helps people seek out answers instead of passively receiving information. This is especially important when exposing hidden ideologies that may motivate seemingly neutral images.

How does visual analysis work?

Visual analysis can include three phases. A given assignment might only ask for observation, or could require all three in a formal interpretation paper.

Phase One: Observation

Observation means closely looking at and identifying the visual attributes of an artwork, trying to describe them carefully and accurately in your own words. The observation phase encourages students to look, think, and find good language to communicate what they notice, all without reading about the work. This phase tends to be the most challenging for students, so make sure to spend adequate time modeling and rehearsing these skills in the museum if possible. Some students will want to jump to analysis or read about the work instead, but keep students focused on what they see. Focusing on visual elements such as color, line, space will help temporarily suspend any symbolic or interpretive impulses. Informal descriptive exercises can be helpful for this as well.

Phase Two: Analysis

Analysis requires you to think about your observations and try to make statements about the work based on the evidence of your observations—akin to using close reading to formulate an argument about a text. This phase encourages students to think about how the specific visual elements they've identified combine together to create a whole, and what effect that whole has on the viewer. You might ask students to comment about how the viewer's eye is led through the work and why, and/or address the artist's choices and what effect they have. Students might be hesitant to draw conclusions based on what they see for fear that they might contradict the artist's intention or museum interpretation, but analysis is about understanding the visual logic of an artwork in itself. Hopefully it is an opportunity to emphasize the legitimacy of multiple viewpoints and voices in the museum. There is still no reading in this phase, save for basic information such as the title and date of the artwork on the museum label. A visual analysis paper is thought piece that does not require any research, though it does have a central argument or thesis.

Phase Three: Interpretation

The difference between visual analysis and interpretation is research. To use visual analysis as the basis for an interpretation of an artwork, have students formulate research questions based on what they have observed and argued thus far. In this final phase (usually for a formal paper or research proposal), students balance observations, description, and analysis with facts about the artist and historical context from trustworthy published sources.

General teaching tips

Try not to concentrate too hard on correct formal terms and comprehensive coverage of the artwork. Rather, let students find their own words to describe a work and follow their own curiosity, then dwell on observations and language as a class or in student groups. For many classes, the sheer rehearsal of looking closely, thinking analytically, and writing clearly is the most useful!

If you are introducing students to visual analysis, model it for them first. Even if you use handouts or give them written explanations of what visual analysis is, they will understand it much better if you show them first before asking them to perform it. This can be achieved in the classroom with an image, or you could spend 15 minutes with a work in the Johnson walking them through your rationale (example in the visual analysis walk-through below).

Group work and writing are helpful if you have a quiet class. Try having students write down their thoughts first before discussion, or break students into groups to run through visual analysis together. You could spend a class session having students observe and describe one element such as color in multiple works, you could have each group focus on one particular visual element to get class discussion rolling.

For sample worksheets and prompts to support visual analysis at the Johnson, see the PDF handout **Johnson Museum Sample Worksheets** in the Museum's website section for **Faculty and instructors**.

WALK-THROUGH OF VISUAL ANALYSIS

This example uses a painting in the Johnson's collection, currently on view on the first floor.

Otto Dix (German, 1891–1969)
Liegender auf Leopardenfell
(Reclining Woman on a Leopard Skin), 1927
Oil on panel
55.031



Start by looking at the painting five to ten minutes without writing anything.

Try to observe from close up and far away, if possible. Focus on the painting as a whole, then try to notice details that pop out at you. When you have finished this initial looking, start writing down your observations. These notes can be very helpful later, especially if you are completing an assignment.

Begin notetaking with general questions such as, “What is the subject of this picture?”

A helpful task might be to write down everything that you see: in this case, a reclining woman in a dress and stockings; a leopard fur and two different textiles around her; a snarling, doglike animal; and wood flooring in the far right of the painting.

Another approach might be to ask yourself what your initial reaction to the work is. Do you find it intimidating, intriguing, weird, pretty? Why? What do you notice first, and why? I notice that her face is in sharp detail and confronts the viewer head-on. The contrast of dark lipstick and light skin, and her framing hand beneath her face, give it further emphasis.

Think about whether a narrative or story is being depicted, even if you don't know what it is immediately. If there is no evident story—such as in this example of Dix's painting—what do you think the artist is focusing on instead?

After asking these questions, you should be able to ascertain your first impressions, the areas of the work that you find most striking, and the basic subject matter of the painting. In the case of Dix's painting, I'm surmising that the woman is likely the subject of the painting based on how much room she takes up, and that this is likely a portrait of an actual woman (not a symbol or allegory) given the visual emphasis on her odd and specific features.

Next, move on to specific visual qualities and observe the painting considering each.

Here are some examples, though you do not need to cover them all!

Note: For sake of space, some responses below fuse observation and analysis. Make sure that students understand the difference, and give a LOT of time to observation and description alone. Try to keep students from rushing into analysis!

STYLE: Do things appear in this painting as we see them in real life, or are they stylized?

Observation: I would say that much of Dix's painting shows things somewhat realistically, though there are elements that seem stylized, such as her facial features. Also, I notice that Dix has deliberately posed her so that she appears to have no neck, and the arm disappearing into the leopard fur seems cut off—especially her hand, which appears almost dismembered.

Analysis: This suggests to me that the painter was reliant on visual reality, but also took opportunities to heighten the viewer's response and emotions through stylistic adaptations and visual exaggerations.

COLOR: The most common colors in Dix's painting appear to be green, red, white, and brown.

I notice that there seems to be a lot of contrast between red (a warm color) and green (a cold color) in this work, even in her skin and face. Similarly, I notice contrasts between dark and light: her face/body vs. the materials on and around her. Each of these contrasts give the work drama and energy that could be discussed in the analysis of the work.

If I try to read color more symbolically, I might note that in Western representation red is often associated with passion and sex (a reclining woman with garter), but also blood and danger (a snarling animal in the background). Formally, I might know that contrasting colors, like red and green, tend to make each other pop visually, and that Dix as an artist might be using this purposefully.

LINE: There are contrasts in line as well: I notice smooth curves around her lower body, especially around her hip and thighs, which might connote the conventionally "feminine," but there are also very angular lines around her face, jaw, fingers, and shoulders, which possibly read as more conventionally "masculine." Her head/face in particular are full of strong lines in her cheeks and jaw; though her eyes also seem exaggerated, like curved almonds or cat eyes.

TEXTURE: Though there is no literal texture in Dix's work since it's a two-dimensional painting made with oil paint on wood panel, the artist has tried very hard to create the illusion of texture: the leopard fur; the velvetlike materials; her stockings, dress, and hair; the fur of the snarling animal. All suggest touch, the invitation to touch, or at least potential tactility—if you survive the attempt!

The textures also suggest a sense of luxury and costume both in her evening wear, which seems a bit fancy or purposeful for a reclining on a bed, and the velvety curtain in the background that suggests a theater curtain—all in all, visual and material richness.

SPACE: Space in this painting seems very tight. The painting is crowded.

I see this in multiple areas of the work, including the fact that her lower legs are cropped out of the picture, that she seems pushed forward toward the viewer in the foreground of the painting. Look how little space remains between her elbow/knees and the edge of the painting, whereas there appears to be more room in the background of the work, though this is hidden from the viewer by the dark green cloth.

Thinking of space another way, I'm wondering where exactly she is. Is this a bedroom? A hotel? What clues, if any, help ascertain this? Is she on a bed? Is the viewer supposed to be on a large bed with her? It's just as important to observe what is left unresolved or unknowable from observation, whether it is to give the work mystery, or to help the viewer better understand what is present and why.

COMPOSITION: How are the visual elements of the work arranged? Do they seem balanced? Is there one focus in particular, or does your eye move around the painting in a particular way?

One way to help ascertain this is to imagine a vertical line dividing the left and right halves of the painting, as well as one dividing the top half from the bottom. In the first instance, we see again what we observed before: a balance of objects but contrast in color and line, in relationship perhaps to traditional gender presentation. Note that the snarling animal balances her head and face, which might be Dix's way of bringing them into comparison with each other, further giving his subject animalistic attributes and emphasizing her alert, fixed gaze on the viewer. Her right arm is poised as if she's about to pounce, whereas her lower half suggests more repose, or at least lets the viewer look at her without direct confrontation. The top and bottom are not balanced, as she occupies all of the bottom, whereas a good amount of the top half is empty—why? How does your eye move around this work? Where do you start, and how are you encouraged (or not encouraged) to look?

SCALE: Is the work life-size, smaller, larger? How does this impact the viewer's relationship to the artwork? In this case, the sitter might be slightly smaller than life-size, but not by much, and the height of the painting from the ground puts her eyes across from ours, which heightens the sense of confrontation.

Next, consider how the visual elements that you've observed work together, and what effect this combined total has on the viewer.

Here it might help to think about how your eye moves around the work and why. You've undoubtedly seen pictures of women reclining before, whether in art or advertising. This one might be similar or different in its willingness to embrace androgyny (or challenge to binary gender conventions) and portrayal of its sitter as active and "seeing" the viewer as much as the viewer sees her.

Consider the artist's decision-making as well for these visual elements: If this is a portrait, is it a flattering one? Did the sitter actually look like this, and would it matter if she did or didn't? How does Dix depict her, and why? Is the title of the work helpful at all? Why did he not use the actual name of the reclining woman in the title? You will want to pull on your observations for style, color, line, texture, space, composition, and scale here. Use them as evidence to draw conclusions about the artwork.

You will not be able to answer all of your questions definitively from merely observing the artwork, but you will be able to make some claims and understand how the painting operates formally given the visual evidence that you've compiled.

If you have an assignment asking you to write an analysis, you should formulate a main claim and seek to support with your observations. **A sample analysis thesis statement here might be: "In his painting *Reclining Woman on a Leopard Skin* (1927), Otto Dix uses visual contrasts to create a provocative and vivid portrait of the sitter."**

In order shift from analysis to interpretation, you will need to research the artist and artwork with sources such as books, articles, and scholarly websites.

The sitter in this artwork is Vera Simailova, and she was a famed actress in the Weimar Republic when Dix painted her portrait.

For the Dix painting, some areas to research might include: investigating the sitter, Vera Simailova, as a person and actor; Weimar Republic café society; gender in the Weimar Republic; Dix's love of satire, his admiration of German Renaissance painters, or his use of traditional painting materials (wood panel instead of canvas). Such information might help answer questions about Dix's stylistic choices and subject matter.

For sample worksheets and prompts to support visual analysis at the Johnson, see the PDF handout **Johnson Museum Sample Worksheets** in the Museum's website section for **Faculty and instructors**.

WORKSHEET FOR STUDENTS

This is a worksheet for instructors to alter for their students.

Feel free to change prompts, spacing, remove text, etc. to work for your class.

You might want to consider whether group or independent work is right for your class, and what you might want to achieve during class versus what needs more time (full list of observation/analysis) and should be completed as homework.

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Visual analysis is not just for art. It is also a critical part of visual literacy, a skill that helps people read and critically interpret images, whether in the museum, on social media, in entertainment, advertising, or the news. As citizens of the 21st century, we are constantly confronted with visual media. Practicing visual analysis sharpens critical judgment skills and helps people seek out answers for themselves instead of passively receiving information. This is especially important when exposing hidden ideologies that may motivate seemingly neutral images.

How does visual analysis work?

Visual analysis can include three phases, but a given assignment might only ask for observation or could require all three in a formal interpretation paper. Make sure you know what you need to do!

Phase One: Observation

Observation means closely looking at and identifying the visual attributes of an artwork, trying to describe them carefully and accurately in your own words. Do not read about the artwork at all. The observation phase is about looking, thinking, and finding good language to communicate what you notice. Trust your eyes and follow your curiosity!

Phase Two: Analysis

Analysis requires you to think about your observations and try to make statements about the work based on the evidence of your observations (akin to using close reading to formulate an argument about a text). Think about how the specific visual elements that you've identified combine together to create a whole, and what effect that whole has on the viewer. How your eye is led through the work and why? What choices did the artist make in creating this work, and what effect they on the viewer? There is still no reading in this phase, save for basic information such as the title and date of the artwork on the museum label. A visual analysis paper is not a research paper.

Phase Three: Interpretation

To use visual analysis as the basis for an interpretation of an artwork, you will need to formulate research questions based on what you have observed and argued thus far. In this final phase (usually for a formal paper or research proposal), your observations, description, and analysis of the work are fused with facts about the artist and historical context that you find in trustworthy published sources.

VISUAL OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

This is an in-depth worksheet to practice visual observation and analysis that can be pared down to fit one class session or extended to suit a class visit followed by homework and/or students returning to the Johnson independently to complete an assignment.

For a more informal or thematic version, see the PDF handout **Johnson Museum Sample Worksheets** in the Museum's website section for **Faculty and instructors**.

PART ONE: Select an artwork (5-10 minutes)

Alone/with a partner/ in a group of 3, select an work of art that you think best communicates (theme of your course or reading, such as animalism, love, musicality, illness, etc). Or can simply say select a work of art that appeals to you.

PART TWO: Look at your artwork independently (5-10 minutes)

Look carefully and silently at your chosen artwork for five minutes. Each group member should take separate notes to capture their initial thoughts and observations. Try to observe the artwork from far away and up close.

As you look, consider:

- What drew you to this work in particular?
- What do you notice first?
- How do you think it was made?
- What feeling, mood, or thought does this work evoke for you?

Discuss your thoughts with your partner/group. What are your first impressions?

PART THREE: Visual observation and description (ideally at least 30 minutes)

Visual artists use formal elements such as style, color, line, texture, space, composition, and scale to create and convey meaning. Looking at your artwork, how would you describe the following visual elements? Remember to note where in the work you see these specifically!

STYLE: Do things appear in this painting as we see them in real life, or are they stylized? Where in the work do you see this?

Observation (description only):

Analysis (thoughts about the effect on the viewer):

COLOR: Are colors warm or cold, bright or muted? Are there many colors or just a few?

Observation:

Analysis:

LINE: What words capture the quality of line in this work? Are there different kinds?

Observation:

Analysis:

TEXTURE: Is there literal texture in your artwork (object, sculpture), or depicted texture (drawing, painting)? Where do you see this?

Observation (What does it look like?):

Analysis (Why do you think the artist chose to depict it like this?):

SPACE: Are objects cramped, or cut off, or do they have a lot of room to breathe? Is the work flat, or does it give an illusion of depth?

Observation:

Analysis:

COMPOSITION: How are the visual elements of the work arranged? Do they seem balanced? Is there one focus in particular, or does your eye move around the painting in a particular way?

One way to help ascertain this is to imagine a vertical line dividing the left and right halves of the painting, as well as one dividing the top half from the bottom. What similarities and differences do you notice comparing the two sides?

Observation:

Analysis:

SCALE: Is the work life-size, smaller, larger? How does this impact the viewer's relationship to the artwork?

Observation:

Analysis:

PART FOUR: Begin visual analysis (20 minutes)

Now that you have looked closely at your artwork and described its visual characteristics—

FIRST: Go back and fill in your analysis for each observation. What effect does the visual elements that you have described

Discuss your thoughts with your partner/group/class.

NEXT: Consider how the visual elements that you've observed work together, and what effect this combined total has on the viewer.

Here it might help to think about how your eye moves around the work and why. Another helpful way to think about this is to consider the artist's decision-making as well for these visual elements. Why would he/she decide to portray it like this? You will want to pull on you observations for style, color, line, texture, space, composition, and scale here. Use them as evidence to draw conclusions about the artwork.

Don't worry about having the right answer. You will not be able to answer all of your questions definitively from merely observing the artwork, but you will be able to make some claims and understand how the painting operates formally given the visual evidence that you've compiled.

Discuss your thoughts with your partner/group/class.

**PART FIVE: Determine some visual analysis arguments about your artwork
(as homework or in following class)**

What can you say about how this work operates/communicates based on what your observations and thoughts?

ARGUMENT 1:

Supporting observation 1:

Supporting observation 2:

ARGUMENT 2:

Supporting observation 1:

Supporting observation 2:

OTHER OPTIONAL FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENTS:

- Based on your arguments, try to develop a thesis about your artwork.
- Develop 5 research questions and/or a research proposal to investigate what you still don't know about this work. What are the next steps?
- Write an interpretation paper building on visual analysis and research from trusted sources.

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

More reading on visual analysis and visual literacy:

Websites

- https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html
—Multiple visual examples of how color, line, space, shape, etc., function in an artwork
- <https://artmuseum.arizona.edu/vocabulary-art-terms>
—Accessible vocabulary list of art terms
- <https://ivla.org/>
—Website of the International Visual Literacy Association
- <https://sites.nasher.duke.edu/hdyl/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2012/12/Visual-Literacy-Bibliography-PDF.pdf>
—Sources and readings on visual literacy compiled by Marianne Wardle, Academic Program Coordinator, Nasher Museum of Art
- http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with_visual_literacy
—An introduction to the Association of College & Research Library’s “Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education”

Books

- Suzanne Hudson and Nancy Noonan-Morrissey, *The Art of Writing about Art* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning, 2002).
- Henry M. Sayre, *Writing about Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).

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Please allow three weeks’ notice to arrange a class session. Scheduling information and additional resources are available at museum.cornell.edu/learn/faculty-and-instructors on our website.